

**VISIBLY INVISIBLE: UNCOVERING IDENTITY FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN  
WOMEN AT AN ACADEMICALLY SELECTIVE UNIVERSITY**

A Dissertation

by

SHELAH FLOWERS CREAR

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Chair of Committee,	Fred Bonner
Co-Chair of Committee,	Terah Venzant Chambers
Committee Members,	Kelli Peck-Parrott
	Norvella Carter
Head of Department,	Fred Nafukho

August 2013

Major Subject: Educational Administration

Copyright 2013 Shelah Flowers Crear

## **ABSTRACT**

Using intersectionality as the theoretical framework, this study examined the identity development of African American women attending an academically selective university. Much of the extant literature on African American college women was either not identity focused or did not speak to the experiences of those students situated in these highly competitive academic environments. A qualitative research approach and case study analysis was utilized for this study. This included the use of photographs and photo-elicitation interviewing to actively engage the study's participants in the process of sharing their identity development and to place their voice and how they make meaning of their complex identities as primary.

Examining both their pre-college and in-college experiences, this study looked closely at the impact of family, peer groups, society, internal messages, and the academically selective university setting on the participants' identity development. While the women in the study enter college viewing identity as largely fixed, the collegiate context played an important role in facilitating their identity evolution. This study outlined the growth process as these participants shifted their understanding of identity from fixed to fluid or from invisible to visible.

Implications for this research include the need for colleges and universities to better address the holistic needs of African American female students, especially at their identity intersections. Additional areas for research include reconceptualizing college

student identity development to incorporate more holistic, intersectional elements as a means to supporting a student's development more comprehensively.

*Keywords:* intersectionality, academically selective university, identity, African American, women, make meaning

## **DEDICATION**

To Chris, Layla, and Christopher

None of this would have been worth it without your love, support, patience and  
steadfast belief in me. We did it.

To Rebellion Seeker, Brenda, and Reagan

You gave me a wonderful gift—your voice. Thank you for being so open and  
honest. This is for you.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

No one completes this journey alone. Although I was the one doing the writing, I was surrounded by family and friends who supported me with their prayers, love, and constant uplift. To my first educators—my parents, Eva and Wilbert Flowers, and my siblings, Najeda McNeal and Brandon Flowers, thank you for instilling a love of learning in me and always believing that I had the potential to be successful. I have always been so proud to further the legacy of education and achievement that was started so long ago in our family. I know that Grandfather would be proud.

To my committee, Dr. Fred Bonner, Dr. Terah Venzant Chambers, Dr. Kelli Peck-Parrott, and Dr. Norvella Carter, I appreciate your support, time, feedback, and investment in both me and my research interests. Alicia Friday, my academic partner in crime—We made it! I feel so fortunate that our paths crossed and that we could go through this experience together. From colleagues to friends, I feel truly blessed that we had the opportunity to grow our friendship over the last 5 years.

Mamta Accapadi, this journey would not have begun without your push. Thank you for your friendship, tough love, and advice over the years. Remember, “If you do not begin, you won’t ever finish!” Delores Rice, your friendship and support kept me sane. I appreciate you answering my many questions, providing endless words of encouragement, motivating me to keep my eye on the prize, all while keeping me laughing. Thank you for being my sister in the struggle. Danielle and Will Lincoln, you

have shared in this experience every step of the way. I am so appreciative of your love, friendship, and support of the entire Crear family throughout this journey.

Megan McSpedon, your words of encouragement allowed me to maintain perspective throughout this process, keeping me focused and grounded. Thank you for being my second set of eyes on this project and insuring that my words truly embodied the participants' voices.

Layla and Christopher, you have been so patient while I have been in school. Thank you for sharing me for a little while. Never forget that you can achieve anything you can dream if you put your mind to it. Finally, to my husband Chris, none of this would have been possible without you. Thank you for being my #1 supporter and motivator and for the many sacrifices you made over the years so that I could pursue my dream. I am so blessed to have you as my partner in life. Always know that we did this as a team.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vii
CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background to the Problem .....	2
Problem Statement .....	4
Purpose of the Study.....	6
Research Questions.....	6
Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality.....	7
Researcher's Relationship to the Problem.....	8
Significance of the Research .....	10
Definition of Terms .....	11
Organization of the Dissertation.....	13
CHAPTER II REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.....	14
Understanding the Academically Selective Institution.....	14
The Residential College System.....	16
Academically Selective University: A Student Profile.....	18
African American Students, Race, and Class at Academically Selective Institutions.....	19
African American Student Life Experience at Selective Institutions.....	22
Origins of Identity.....	24
African Americans and Identity Development.....	27
College Student Development Theory.....	28
Multiple Identity Frameworks.....	29
African American Women--Race and Gender.....	31
Intersectionality.....	33
Summary.....	37

CHAPTER III RESEARCH METHODS.....	39
Research Design.....	39
Statement of the Research Questions.....	40
Rationale for Intersectionality.....	41
Research Paradigm: Case Study.....	43
Site Selection.....	44
Brooks University: Campus Context.....	46
Data Sources.....	47
Data Collection.....	52
Data Analysis Strategies.....	59
Voice.....	65
Researcher's Positionality.....	66
Summary.....	68
CHAPTER IV RESEARCH FINDINGS.....	70
Introduction.....	92
Selection of Pseudonyms.....	71
The Photographs.....	72
Overview of the Participants.....	73
Understanding Rebellion Seeker.....	74
Understanding Brenda.....	92
Understanding Reagan.....	107
Their Shared Experiences.....	120
Summary of Findings .....	130
CHAPTER V INTERPRETATION, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION.....	132
Relation to Theoretical Framework .....	132
The Shaping of Identity Development (RQ#1).....	134
The Development and Making Meaning Process (RQ#2).....	137
From Fixed to Fluid: The Process of Viewing Self as Intersectional.....	141
The Impact of Navigation on Integration (RQ#3).....	144
Implications for Practice.....	146
Implications for Research.....	150
Summary and Conclusion.....	152
REFERENCES.....	154
APPENDIX A.....	171
APPENDIX B..... (oooooooooooooooooooo)	172
APPENDIX C..... (oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo)	173



APPENDIX D .....	175
APPENDIX E .....	177
APPENDIX F .....	178
APPENDIX G .....	180

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“Living our identities is much like breathing. We don’t have to ask ourselves each morning who we are. We simply are...Identity is never fixed; it continually evolves. But something in it stays constant; even when we change, we are recognizably who we have always been. Identity links the past, the present and the social world into a narrative that makes sense. It embodies both change and continuity.”

Josselson, R.E. (1996). *Revising herself. The story of women’s identity from college to Midlife*. New York: Oxford University Press.

The undergraduate experience is a transformative one, marking a time in many young adults’ lives of great discovery, independent decision-making, introspection, and personal growth. The developmental highs and lows that students encounter in college catalyze many defining moments—experiences when coupled with previous life challenges and successes—can shape the trajectory of their lives (Baxter Magolda, 2006; Glisczinski, 2007). Through Chickering’s (1969) research, this time of significant change in a college student’s life is defined and validated. However, this developmental theory was not constructed with a diverse student population in mind and thus does not fully encapsulate the breadth of the multicultural student experience (Cheatham & Berg-Cross, 1992). Because of this gap in the literature, questions remain about the developmental experiences of students of color, particular African American women, during these pivotal undergraduate years. This study examines the identity development of African American college women, the complex nature of their evolving identities, and the ways in which the navigation of their identity influenced their experiences at Brooks University, an academically selective institution.

The context of this study focuses on the academically selective university because

of the perceived societal value of holding a degree from this type of institution. Martin (2011) asserts, “Elite universities have a disproportionate influence despite relatively small enrollments and act as channels to lucrative careers and positions of power” (p. 427). Developed in part to educate our nation’s elite, many elite institutions still maintain this level of influence, affording those who are fortunate enough to attend these universities with enhanced social privileges (Stevens, 2007).

In an increasingly more competitive workforce, it is becoming insufficient to simply have an undergraduate degree. Rather than pursuing a costly advanced degree, students can add increased value to their collegiate experience and increase their earning potential by successfully completing a degree from an academically selective college or university (Pascarella et al., 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Examining the experiences of African American students attending these colleges or universities is valuable because these institutions are often instrumental in making change in the higher education landscape and are positioned to “...create opportunity for students from traditionally marginalized groups because these schools have wide latitude in choosing whom to recruit, admit, enroll, and graduate” (Espenshade & Radford, 2009, p. 3). Because of their roles as change agents and educational gatekeepers, obtaining a greater awareness of African American women’s experiences in this context allows for the better serving of these students across all types of higher education institutions.

### **Background to the Problem**

While much attention has been paid to the need to dedicate additional resources to the retention of African American men on college and university campuses (Cuyjet,

2006; Harper, 2006; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Strayhorn, 2008), African American women often become the forgotten community both in the literature and in actual program implementation (Museus & Griffin, 2011; Rosales & Person, 2003). In fact, 58% of all African American undergraduate students are women. From 1999-2010, African American women earned 66% of all bachelors' degrees, 71% of all Masters degrees, and 65% of all doctoral degrees awarded to African American students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). In spite of these successful numbers, these percentages do not reveal the entire story and only provide insight about academic retention. These numbers do not provide elucidate how these African American women transition from their communities to the more racially and socioeconomically homogenous environment of the selective, predominately White university. Although graduation rates are important, they are not the only marker of undergraduate success. College has a transformative ability to enable students to think critically, engage in discourse, and most importantly, prepare students for "present realities and future surprises to effectively engage the future's unknown" (Glisczinski, 2007, p. 322). Graduation is the expectation at many of these institutions so the institution has a responsibility to its community to provide additional benefits above and beyond retention.

Although the motivation for African American women at these competitive institutions to persist is fueled by anticipated post-graduation economic gains (Useem & Karabel, 1986), persistence comes at a cost. African Americans report feeling isolated and experiencing racism in this environment (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Fries-Britt & Turner,

2002; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). The National Study of College Experience (NSCE) has amassed longitudinal data from more than 10,000 students who applied for admission at eight academically selective institutions, inclusive of public, private, research universities, and liberal arts colleges. In this national survey, African Americans expressed the lowest satisfaction with their campus social climate in comparison to their Latino, Asian and White peers. Espenshade & Radford (2009) conjecture that this dissatisfaction is linked to class and African American students' feelings of discomfort are due to the socioeconomic disparity. While challenges around class issues may be problematic for some African American students, asserting this as the justification for low student satisfaction discounts the voices of those African American students who come from economic circumstances analogous to their peers of other ethnicities. This provides colleges and universities with an easy scapegoat for the real issue—a lack of investment in the individual student experience and the specialized programming to support her needs.

### **Problem Statement**

Situated in the context of the academically elite university, this study examined the pre- and in-college experiences that influenced the formation, development, and ways in which African American undergraduate women make meaning of their identity development. As affirmed by Chickering and Reisser (1993), Baxter Magolda (2006) and Glisczinski (2007), college has the ability to be a transformational experience for students, providing them with the freedom and independence to discover what they believe in and define themselves on their own terms. This time period is important

because developmentally, they are reexamining “the beliefs they have learned in their families to form a set of beliefs that is the product of their own independent reflections” (Arnett, 2000, p. 474). With college as the context, it is important to examine the ways in which identity development unfolds in this environment. As the research affirms, African American students attending academically elite institutions are more likely to persist, graduate, and secure financially lucrative jobs, all important metrics of success when trying to mitigate the achievement gap (Useem & Karabel, 1986; Small & Winship; 2006).

When examining the identity development of African American college women, the literature is often centered on their racialized experiences, placing importance and presuming a high level of saliency for this single aspect of their identity. In an attempt to make sure that African American women’s voices are “heard,” they can be juxtaposed against White women’s experiences which not only positions the African American experience as being disparate, other, or atypical, but it asserts a notion that research on African Americans is not valuable enough to stand on its own. This singular emphasis on race disregards how the intersection and connection between the elements of one’s identity coalesce to create a unique self, one that is racialized, sexualized, gendered, and potentially shaped by spirituality and socioeconomics. Jordan-Zachery (2007) asserts, “...my blackness cannot be separated from my womaness...Sometimes my identity is like a “marble” cake, in that my blackness is mixed intricately with my womaness and therefore cannot be separated or unlocked” (p. 261). Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the African American woman’s identity development provides the

opportunity to expand the discussion. By looking at this population's undergraduate experience through a holistic lens, it inform both the college student development and identity development literature on this topic, while giving voice to the unique experience of being an underrepresented student at an academically selective university.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The intent of this study is to focus on the developmental elements of intersectionality and give voice to the complexity of the women's identities, as defined by them. Rather than focusing the conversation exclusively on the intersection between race and gender, this study aims to expand the discourse by examining all components of the participants' identities, how they make meaning of them, and the impact that navigating these intersecting identities has on their integration into the Brooks University campus community.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions serve as the basis of inquiry for discovering how African American college women make meaning of their identities in the academically elite educational environment:

1) How has the identity development of African American women attending an academically selective university been shaped by their both their pre-college and in-college experiences?

2) How do African American undergraduate women's identities develop in this educational context and how do they make meaning of them?

3) In what ways has the navigation of their complex identities influenced African American women's ability to integrate into the Brooks University campus community?

### **Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is “the processes through which multiple social identities converge and ultimately shape individual and group experiences” (Shields, 2008, p. 302). Central to this theoretical framework is the idea of providing a voice to individuals that have been silenced, marginalized and excluded. With its origins in critical and feminist frameworks, the spirit of intersectionality focuses on dismantling and deconstructing systems which oppress and constrain women possessing multiple identities (Crenshaw, 1991). A study focused on the experiences of African American women in an academically elite setting and their complex identity development is enhanced when conducted using qualitative methodologies. Qualitative research emphasizes context and it is “The context of the lived experience which provides us with a deeper understanding...It allows us to better understand how these individuals experience intersectionality” (Jordan-Zachery, 2007, p. 261). This framework encompasses numerous aspects of a person's identity development, looking at them holistically rather than viewing identity through a compartmentalized, fragmented lens. Unrestricted and not limited to one aspect of identity, employing this framework allows the participants to dictate the discourse, rather than have it shaped or even limited by the developmental model or the researcher.

Critiques of intersectionality as a viable framework stem from the challenges inherent in applying methodology to a concept rooted in what can be inexplicable—



articulating one's definition of self (Bowleg, 2008; Hancock, 2007; Jordan-Zachery, 2007; McCall, 2005; Shields, 2008). While it can be straightforward for a participant to discuss the development of her racial identity or to detail when she began to understand herself in a gendered context, the relationship between these two elements can often not be articulated as easily. There are no clear lines between where one aspect of identity ends and another begins. These aspects are intertwined, simultaneously informing, actualizing, stifling, silencing, and magnifying other elements of our identities that make us who we are. This study recognizes how important understanding this is to the identity dialogue. Utilizing varied forms of data collection, the study uncovers how the participants make meaning of their identities, placing their understanding of their identity at the forefront while attempting to minimize the researcher's interjections.

### **Researcher's Relationship to the Problem**

I have always felt a strong personal and academic pull to the concepts of identity formation and development. Identity theories provide researchers and practitioners with an important roadmap, facilitating a deeper understanding of how individuals develop and change in response to their life experiences. As a Masters student and young professional, studying the various student developmental frameworks actualized important connections for me between theories and their application. In particular, Cross' Nigrescence Model of Adult Identity Conversion (Cross, 1991) had a significant impact in my own life, serving as a springboard for my academic research interests and as a backdrop to the recognition and deeper understanding of my own racial saliency.

Working on the campus of an academically, selective university broadened my knowledge of the African American student experience. Many of the students I worked closely with had very different early education trajectories compared to their peers at the large, public, state institutions I had worked at previously. The Brooks students' understanding of race, gender, sexuality, religion and class was shaped by their life experiences, experiences that had been affected by their status as high academic achievers. Upon arriving at the institution, I sensed within the community the perception that intellect served as a great equalizer, one that muted the presence and subordinated the importance of other identifiers. While some African American students seemed to buy into this notion of intellect as a universal trump card, I could see others attempting to make sense of how all aspects of their complex identities fit in this educational environment.

Further complicating the situation for these students were the limited resources dedicated to their holistic undergraduate experience. Having worked at both large, public institutions as well as a small, private university, I noticed that services for underrepresented student populations tended to focus on one aspect of their identity. For students of color, that aspect is typically race. For LGBTQ students, that aspect is sexual orientation, and for women that aspect is gender. Students are forced into these narrow, homogeneous groups in order to gain access to specialized resources of any type, with little institutional emphasis placed on addressing intragroup differences, let alone the relationships between these aspects of identity. Rather than the student dictating their identity and how they are perceived, the institution determines how

students should make sense of their identities, forcing a sense of saliency and meting out resources accordingly. In order to make changes to the types of programs being offered to serve diverse populations, administrators and faculty have to have a more nuanced understanding of how these students experience college.

### **Significance of the Research**

While the current body of literature on African American college students is significant, the emphasis is largely on their experiences at public, predominately White institutions (Bourke, 2010; Chavous, 2000; D'Augelli & Herschberger, 1993; Fries-Britt, 2000; Fries-Britt and Turner, 2001; Gloria, Kurpius, Hamilton, and Willson, 1999). That literature which does examine the experiences of African American students at academically selective institutions is extremely narrow, with more literature centering on African American students' primary and secondary experiences at selective college preparatory schools (Cookson & Persell, 1991; DeCuir-Gumby, 2007; Horvat & Antonio, 1999).

Equally as limited is the extant research on the underrepresented student experience at selective universities. While the literature provides some insight as to the educational pipeline, classroom engagement, and familial backgrounds, little attention is paid to the student's integration into the fabric of an institution, holistic identity development, or to the unique experiences of African American women in these educational environments (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Massey, Charles, Lundy & Fischer, 2003; Rivas-Drake & Mooney 2008, 2009). If the African American

undergraduate experience is discussed in gendered terms, more attention is given to the experiences of men (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2005).

As mentioned previously, in spite of the fact that the majority of African American college graduates are female, too often African American women's voices and unique perspectives are absorbed into more comprehensive studies emphasizing the African American student experience as a whole. Given that larger numbers of African American women are navigating the P-16 pipeline with greater success than their male counterparts and persisting to receive an undergraduate degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), it is critical to look specifically at their college experiences, developmental journeys and the impact that juggling multiple intersecting identities has on their integration into the institution.

### **Definition of Terms**

- (1) Academically elite/Academically selective institution: Academically selective colleges and universities are among the most highly rated universities in publications such as U.S. News and World Report. Selectivity is determined using a variety of factors, with standardized test scores such as the SAT and ACT serving as the primary indicators driving institution selectivity (Bowen & Bok, 1998). Academic reputation, faculty and financial resources, student selectivity, retention, alumni giving, graduation rate performances and diversity are also integral to the selectivity equation (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Massey, Charles, Lundy & Fischer, 2003; Bowen & Bok, 1998).
- (2) African American: The term 'African American' was defined broadly for the purposes of this study. Participants who self-identified as multiracial or were of African

or West Indian descent were able to engage in the study, as long as they personally connected in some way with being African American. Because this study was not exclusively focused on race and racial identity development, the participants' connection to this aspect of their identity became less important. What was paramount was that participants were able to take initiative in their own identification and classification, as they made meaning of it, without that element being strictly defined by the study's parameters.

(3) Context: The proximal and distal factors that interact, providing experiences, opportunities, role models, and limitations that shape identity formation and are themselves changed by choices the individual makes. (Phinney, 2008, p. 99)

(4) Identity: A complex, dynamic construct that develops over time as individuals strive to make sense of who they are in terms of the groups they belong to within their immediate and larger social contexts. The process of identity development takes place over extended periods of time, from childhood through adulthood, and is significantly influenced by the contexts in which people live. (Phinney, 2008, p. 98)

(5) Identity Development: A process of integrating and expanding one's sense of self (Myers et al., 1991, p. 54).

(6) Residential College: A small, cross-sectional, social and academic unit situated within a larger university. Largely decentralized from the university, residential colleges are designed to promote an interactive social and intellectual living/learning experience for undergraduate students by providing them with consistent interaction with faculty members who also live with the students (O'Hara, 2002, p. 52-53).

(7) Salience/Saliency: Salience refers to the prominence or importance attached to a particular experience, idea, feeling, or, in this case, social identity. (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 40).

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters that discuss the identity development of African American college women at an academically selective university. Chapter I provides an overview of the topic, pertinent background information and the purpose of the study. In addition to discussing intersectionality, the theoretical framework employed in the study, this chapter highlights the researcher's positionality to the problem and why exploring this topic is academically relevant.

Chapter II is a review of the literature that includes historical information about the academically selective university and the residential college system, the setting for the study. Also detailed in this chapter is an exploration of intersectionality and its identity theory precursors. Chapter III discusses the methodological approaches employed in the study and outlines how they correlate to the theoretical framework. This chapter also contains a more extensive explanation of the study itself, how it was conducted, what measures were taken to insure trustworthiness, and the data analysis process. In Chapter IV, the participants' experiences are examined at length, organized in narrative format which allows for the participants' voices to be primary. Chapter V concludes with an analysis of the data and its correlation to the study's research questions as well as a review of the findings and their implications for practice and research.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

This literature review explores a variety of topics associated with African American college women and their identity formation. This review examines the origins of identity, intersectionality and its identity theory precursors, and the academically selective university environment, while also addressing the sociocultural trajectory of African American women and their elite K-12 and higher education experiences. Employing the theoretical framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) this review of the literature connects this framework to the African American college woman, her development, and her educational experiences.

#### **Understanding the Academically Selective Institution**

With the academically selective institution serving as the context for this study, it was important to understand the environment and to frame how students of diverse backgrounds matriculate at these types of institutions. Because of the unique social climate of these colleges and universities, they have historically been viewed both as bastions of academic excellence as well as markers of social status (Katchadourian & Boli, 1994). Students attending these types of institutions come from varied backgrounds with some being legacies, meaning that family members have attended the institution prior to them (Martin & Spenner, 2009). In spite of most academically selective institutions' efforts to diversify their student bodies (Stevens, 2007), they are heavily populated with students from affluent backgrounds (Kingston & Lewis, 1990). Establishing social networks can be challenging for those underrepresented students

whose life experiences differ significantly from their peers, thus impacting how more diverse students integrate into the campus life. (Torres, 2009; Martin, 2011) Differences between social class and its correlation to cultural capital can create a sense of culture shock (Torres, 2009) in this new environment, especially for those students from working class backgrounds.

Much of the extant literature centers on the admissions process for underrepresented students attempting to gain entry into these highly competitive institutions (Espenshade, Hale & Chung, 2005; Harper & Griffin, 2011; Stevens, 2007) and on their transition and retention once admitted (Lopez, 2009; Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2009; Small & Winship, 2006; Torres, 2009). The retention-oriented research provides insight into barriers that impact achievement, especially for Latino students, however it does not address those challenges unique to the African American student population, particularly women. Additionally, little consideration is given to the identity development of students who have matriculated at these institutions.

Far more time and attention is provided to the narrative of African American college students who in spite of seemingly insurmountable personal and academic barriers overcome these challenges and persist through a treacherous and often hostile educational environment (D'Augelli & Hersherberger, 2003; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald & Bylsma, 2003). Although this is still reality for many African American college students, and while the achievement gap between African Americans and Whites is ever present (NCES, 2009), it is no longer the only narrative. Just as Historically Black Colleges and Universities are not the only avenue available for



African American students to pursue higher education, not every African American student enters the collegiate environment unprepared for the academic, social and cultural climate (Espenshade & Radford, 2009).

### **The Residential College System**

While not all academically selective universities have residential college systems in place, that system is endemic to Brooks University. In order to contextualize the study, it is important to understand the origins of the residential college system, its structure, and its impact on the undergraduate experience. Heavily influenced by British education, the American collegiate system borrowed some of its most enduring elements from that system (Rudolph, 1990). The residential college tradition originated at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge between 1820 and 1850 (O'Hara, 2002). This community-oriented experience was meant to combine communal living, faculty engagement, moral education, and fraternalism (Duke, 1996). Holistic and inherently developmental in nature, in many ways the residential college system was the precursor to modern day student affairs. The residential colleges were meant to facilitate the university in addressing the needs of each student while playing a part in cultivating his character and spirituality (Ryan, 1992). In addition to this emphasis on character building, the college environment also promoted "...athletic competition, loyalty to the school itself, and the assumption that residence was essential to the educational experience" (Duke, 1996, p. 23). Faculty members called masters were charged with serving as mentors to the men in their residential college and were a departure from the dons, teachers who were perceived as being unapproachable and disconnected from their

students (Duke, 1996). The relationships built between students and their masters were essential to the residential college ideal which was built on the premise that, “informal contact in structured community life is a significant element in the learning process—contact between students and instructors, and among students themselves” (Ryan, 1992, p. 34). Students were meant to learn from faculty members while also learning by engaging with their peers.

In their American iteration, residential colleges were most popular with Ivy League institutions and were a part of the residential framework at both Harvard and Yale. (Duke, 1996). Replete with their own traditions and rituals, students quickly developed an allegiance to their residential colleges. Not without their critics, the development of residential colleges was also seen as an impediment to student independence. According to Rudolph, “It often led to excessive paternalism, a handholding, spoon-feeding that would prolong adolescence unnecessarily” (1990, p. 108). Designed to encourage interactions amongst students of varying social classes, Harvard and Yale attempted to intelligently design their residential communities creating, “...cross sections of the student bodies, mixing pupils of different economic backgrounds, academic interests, and religious affiliations” (Duke, 1996, p. 113). Although these populations represented various subpopulations of the university community, the goal of the residential colleges was to “homogenize the undergraduate student body,” connecting them under the common umbrella of the shared residential experience (p. 113).

### **Academically Selective University: A Student Profile**

African American students who attend academically selective colleges and universities have extremely diverse pathways to achieving this metric of academic success (Espenshade & Radford, 2009). According to data collected in the National Study of College Experience (NSCE), African American students who are admitted to selective institutions are less likely to be first generation college students, come from more affluent backgrounds, and had parents who were actively involved in their academic life (Espenshade & Radford, 2009). Small and Winship (2006) emphasize, “institutional selectivity is strongly and positively related to college completion for black students: quite simply, the more selective the college black students attend, the more likely they are to graduate” (Stevens, 2007).

The National Longitudinal Survey of Freshman (NSLF) is another tool developed in order to gather data about the experiences of underrepresented students attending select academically elite institutions (Massey, Charles, Lundy & Fischer, 2003). Tracking everything from test scores and pre-college preparation to first semester retention rates, this survey provides important quantitative data about underrepresented student populations. Black students whose parents have immigrated to the United States are substantially overrepresented in selective institutions’ admissions pools, accounting for 25% of the overall class compared to just 3% nationally (Massey et al., 2003). Similar to their less competitive counterparts, academically selective institutions are more heavily populated by African American females. (Espenshade & Radford, 2009) According to the institutions surveyed in the NSLF, two-thirds of the first year classes at

twenty-eight elite institutions were female (Massey et al., 2003, p. 201). When evaluating the unique challenges of being African American and female in this environment, the gender imbalance serves as yet another factor impacting the identity development of African American women. The NSLF also indicates that while heavily involved in disciplining, African American parents are not as involved in their children's social relationships. NSLF defines parental involvement in social relationships as knowing their child's friends and cultivating personal or more peer oriented rather than hierarchical relationships with their child. In spite of the lower level of interactions with their children's personal lives, it is African American students who appear to be the most psychologically prepared for the diverse interactions that can be expected in college (Massey et al., 2003, p. 201). The parenting style that combines discipline with a strong sense of personal autonomy serves African American students well, "especially in the areas of self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy" (p. 205). From this data, it appears that African American students arrive on the campuses of these institutions feeling resilient and confident. If this is in fact the case, that African American students arrive at these universities with high levels of self-esteem and perceived self-efficacy, this context should prove to be a strong backdrop to analyzing their experiences and identity development.

### **African American Students, Race, and Class at Academically Selective Institutions**

Because the extant literature on the African American student experience at academically selective colleges and universities is so sparse, literature from both the higher education as well as the K-12 realm is discussed. African American students who

attend selective institutions both in elementary, middle or high schools as well as the higher education level, often experience cultural dissonance. In a study conducted by Cookson and Persell (1991) on the impact of race and class in elite boarding schools, they find that although most boarding schools are sensitive to these issues, the school environment for African American students can still be a challenging one. Through their mixed methods study during which they survey more than 2,000 students at twenty institutions and conduct interviews of administrators, students, teachers and alumni, Cookson and Persell (1991) find that African American students are doubly marginalized because of the intersection of race and class. Already ethnic minorities, the class differential exacerbates the divide between African American students and their non-Black peers. In these academically elite settings, this division isolates African American students, creating an environment in which they never feel as though they are fully incorporated into the institution's culture (DeCuir-Gumby, 2007). Stevens (2007) conducts a longitudinal study in which he immerses himself in the culture of an academically selective institution in the northeast. While working in the admissions office, he is privy to a behind-the-scenes look at the university's inner workings. He comments:

A great deal, but far from everything, has changed at schools like the college in the forty years since students of color were first invited to attend them; the curricula, religious traditions, student cultures, and even the locations of the schools serving the national upper classes continue to bear the imprint of their exclusionary history. (pp. 142-143)

In a 2011 study, Martin utilizes data from Duke University and a nationally recognized longitudinal survey called the CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program) to look at the impact of class on student integration into campus life. Organizing students into four designations, Professional, Executive, Middle, and Subordinate, students are grouped according to the parental education, occupation and income. Although the Middle and Subordinate groupings represent the largest and most diverse percentage of the student population at these elite institutions, more than 60% of the overall population, full engagement in the university experience proves challenging for them. Entering college with different expectations, students in these groupings prioritize personal growth and development over their social lives, are less likely to study abroad, less likely to consume alcohol, and are generally less involved in campus co-curricular activities such as clubs and intermural sports (Martin, 2011).

Although African American students who attend college preparatory schools and selective colleges and universities often have parents who attain a higher level of education, possess more graduate degrees, and hold more professional occupations than their counterparts attending public high schools and less competitive universities, their parents still on average earned significantly less than their White counterparts (Cookson & Persell, 1991). In these academic settings, African Americans are often expected to shirk elements of their identity in order to connect with the larger group. The researchers liken these types of educational environments to crucibles in which students are expected to "...give up significant parts of themselves in order to forward the interest of the group" (Cookson & Persell, 1985, p. 124) This positioning of the needs of the

individual as secondary to the needs of the whole has historical roots in elite education, continuing to be reproduced even in the modern iterations of academically selective institutions. Fries-Britt (1988) examines the experience of high achieving African American students participating in a selective STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) program and determines that these academically gifted students have little interaction with peers of their race while in high school, corroborating the isolation discussed by Cookson and Persell. Regardless of whether African American students attend predominately White schools prior to college or are in homogeneous academic environments, each group experiences isolation linked to their intellectual ability and achievement (Fries-Britt, 1998). Given the limited body of research on the African American student experience in elite higher education settings, studies such as these play an important role in informing this discussion.

### **African American Student Life Experience at Selective Institutions**

African American students describe the culture at selective institutions as revolving around White, upper-middle-class values in which students are expected to have a certain access to financial resources in order to engage with the community. Students also comment that they often feel required to participate in activities that they do not consider to be appealing to African American students (Walpole, 2009). Although education is often portrayed as being the great equalizer, African American students still feel disconnected to the larger community in these academically selective environments (2009). Winkle-Wagner (2009), who examines culture shock at large, public PWIs (Predominately White Institutions) and Torres (2009) who researches a similar

phenomenon at an academically selective institution indicate that African American students find these campuses to not only be White in terms of population but in terms of campus culture as well. Participants in Winkle-Wagner's study refer to campus as having a "White college culture" which is presented as the ideal campus culture and one in which they are expected to assimilate into. Integration by assimilation is not only asserted by the dominant culture. Students of color also contend with intragroup pressure to conform. Although Lopez's research on students' transition into a private, academically elite institution focuses exclusively on the Latino experience, his findings also inform this discussion on the African American experience as well. First year, Latino students express feelings of stress induced by peers pressuring them to not "act White" and to "show loyalty to the race" (Lopez, 2005, p. 360).

African American students who attend selective institutions are more likely to graduate from college (Small & Winship, 2006) however what personal, social, and emotional sacrifices must these students make in order to do so. Stevens (2007) critiques that these institutions are unable to move beyond the confines of their exclusive mindset and while they are able to recruit high achieving African American students, these institutions are not successful at "...creating contexts in which students of color can enjoy their college years as much as their White peers" (p. 178). Chambers, Huggins, Locke and Fowler (2011) coin the phrase *racial opportunity cost*, when refers to the "the degree to which schools force students of color to give up, sacrifice, or disconnect from aspects of their racial identity to meet socially constructed norms for academic success" (Venzant Chambers & McCready, 2011). In many of these elite



schools, K-12 as well as colleges and universities, the institutional culture that is maintained reflects the dominant population--wealthy, privileged, and White (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Torres, 2009). Horvat and Antonio's research at an elite, all female, predominately White secondary school, underscores the feelings of otherness this environment can create. Being in this environment, the African American participants in the study feel forced to adapt their identities and while that was not feasible in terms of their race or gender, the women modify their speech, alter their taste in music, and "surrendered their sense of racial pride and belonging as a part of their effort to navigate life at a school where their racial heritage did not appear to be acknowledged or valued" (Horvat & Antonio, 1999, p. 334). Called "shifting," it is the process of modifying behavior to "accommodate differences in class as well as gender and ethnicity." Because shifting is so engrained in many Black woman's existence, she often does not realize its impact and how it, "chips away at her sense of self, at her feelings of wholeness and centeredness" (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 7). For students whose home life is significantly different from what they experience at school, it may seem as if they are living in two completely separate worlds. This dichotomous existence is amplified by the multiple, subordinated identities that African American college women experience.

### **Origins of Identity**

Before meaning can be made of a theoretical framework such as intersectionality, there first must be an understanding of identity and its origins. Introduced initially by Freud (1923), he articulates that identity connects an individual's values with his own

history, an assertion that is incorporated into other developmental theories such as Nigrescence theories (Cross, 1991; Jackson, 2001). As the discussion of identity formation and development evolve, its connection to social, emotional, and cognitive growth becomes more prevalent in the literature (Chickering & Reisser 1993; Erikson, 1959; Hauser & Kasendorf; 1983; Marcia, 1980). The discourse continues and addresses when identity is formed, whether in childhood (Erikson, 1959), adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Chickering, 1969, Erikson, 1959), or is an ongoing process not bound by age (Baxter Magolda, 1998; Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001). Research such as that conducted by Erikson (1959), Marcia (1980) and Josselson (1971) all position identity as a series of stages needing resolution. The idea that identity is a state that can be achieved is foundational to understanding identity development's origins and its evolution from that which conceptualizes identity as more fixed and less developmental versus one that is fluid and evolves over the life span. While many of these theories address specific elements of one's identity, they often provide a perspective that is so simplified it fails to address the complexities associated with identity construction and development (Reynolds & Pope, 1991).

In contrast to these early identity theories, more recent theorists are beginning to reframe identity, examining it through a more dynamic lens. In a departure from the aforementioned psychological perspective of identity, Winkle-Wagner views identity from a sociological vantage point. Instead of seeing self as singular, she makes room for multiple selves in her theoretical concept called the Unchosen Me, allowing for "a multiple-identities perspective that is similar to the way many of the Black women [in

her study] end up describing themselves—as if they experience a two-ness or multiple selves at once” (2009, p. 19). Grounding her theory in a sociological framework allows her to examine the interactions that “create race and gender”(Winkle-Wagner, 2009).

Baxter Magolda (1998) asserts that identity development and an understanding of self are linked to self-authorship or “the ability to collect, interpret, and analyze information and reflect on one’s own belief in order to form judgments”(p. 143). Self-synthesis is an important element of Baxter Magolda’s theory for it situates identity construction and the understanding of identity within the individual rather than giving it an external locus. According to Phinney (2008), most can agree that “...identity is a complex, dynamic construct that develops over time as individuals strive to make sense of who they are in terms of the groups they belong to within their immediate and larger social contexts” (p. 98). This fluidity that Phinney speaks to highlights an evolutionary aspect inherent in identity. While identity can serve as a “cognitive map that functions in a multitude of ways to guide and direct exchanges with one’s social and material realities” (Cross, 1995, p. 117) there is not one way of knowing or being, even for people who hold many of the same group identities.

Although many identity models are stage based or progression oriented (Arnett, 2000; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Cross, 1995; Erikson, 1959; Jackson, 2001; Phinney, 2008), intersectionality reflects the aforementioned fluidity, allowing for identity to again be redefined and reframed in more comprehensive ways. The discourse on identity is complex, filled with varied perspectives and one of its greatest challenges remains the achievement of “a dynamic and contextualized understanding of how senses

of self are continuous *and* changing, and how personal *and* community beliefs and practices intertwine in identity making” (Thorne, 2004, p. 5).

### **African Americans and Identity Development**

During the Civil Rights Era, African Americans reframe their identities in response to the changes that occur politically and socially on the larger cultural landscape. (Jackson, 2001) Changes to their social status and increased access due to desegregation foster an environment of progressiveness in which African American scholars begin looking more closely at how racial identity is formed. “Considerable interest is expressed in gaining an understanding of why some Blacks seemed to be extremely angry at their life circumstances, while others, who seemed to live in the same circumstances, were not as angry or were even quite content” (Jackson, 2001, p. 10). Cross’s Nigrescence Model of Adult Identity Conversion (1971, 1991) and Jackson’s Black Identity Development Theory (1971, 2001) emerge, serving as seminal works, contributing not only to the understanding of the African American experience but also influencing the development of other identity frameworks (Downing & Roush, 1985; Hardiman, 1994; Helms, 1984; Kich, 1992; Poston 1990). The development of an African American specific identity model provides a voice to the unique experience of what it means to be African American in the United States by asserting a universal understanding of how people make meaning of the racialized aspect of their identity.

Critics of these racial identity frameworks maintain that no ethnic group is monolithic and while these theories are important in understanding how African Americans actualize race, none speak to the gender, sexual orientation, class, spiritual, or

ethnic diversity within the population (Constantine, Richardson, Benjamin, & Wilson, 1998). While the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) attempts to address these concerns, its focus on determining race's centrality for an individual still places a premium on salience rather than viewing race as interdependent on other aspects of identity (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Additionally, a singular focus on race minimizes the experiences of those for whom race is less salient or not salient at all, disempowering and disconnecting those whose identity formation diverges from the linear progression of these frameworks.

### **College Student Development Theory**

College is a period of significant growth and change for many students. In addition to becoming more independent, it is during college when many students begin to self-actualize and realize who they are outside of the influence of their families. Azmitia, Syed & Radmacher (2008) assert "that the college context offers a wide array of potential experiences that may cause emerging adults to rethink their identities and reconfigure them in new ways" (p. 11). This body of literature informs the study by providing a context to understand those elements that may compound the participants' identity development. Merging the developmental aspects with the identity development components allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how the study's participants make meaning of who they are. Chickering and Reisser's (1993) research on college student development serves an important guidepost for understanding how students evolve during their college years. His seven vectors provide one of the first cognitive maps outlining undergraduate students' movement through the experiences

that shape their identity and inform their decision-making (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). While Erikson (1968) determines that most of identity formation occurs during adolescence, Chickering and Reisser's (1993) revision of the seven vectors framework recognize that identity development is a central element of a college student's transition to adulthood. Their research also provides an important counter narrative to Erikson, maintaining that identity development, at least in part, continues its formation during the undergraduate years. Corroborating this is the research of Baxter Magolda (1998) whose self-authorship theory maintains that during the undergraduate years, students begin the process of defining "Who am I? What do I believe? What relationships are important to me to establish and maintain?" Chickering's research is important because of its unilateral focus on those issues unique to undergraduate students, however it is also criticized because of its limited scope and its focus exclusively on White males (Cheatham & Berg-Cross, 1992). As subsequent research would reveal, the identity development of students of color and women is connected to Chickering's work, but also carves out a distinctive developmental experience for members of these groups.

### **Multiple Identity Frameworks**

The Multiple Dimensions of Identity Model (MMDI) is developed as a means to address gaps in the literature regarding the intersections of multiple socially constructed identities (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Using grounded theory, the model emerges out of research conducted on a diverse population of undergraduate college students, thus making it important for its ability to posit the identity discussion within the higher

education framework. Influenced by the work of Reynolds and Pope (1991), Jones and McEwen (2000) deviate from the early multiple identity models by choosing to focus less on the connection between various identities and their corresponding oppressions. Instead, MMDI attempts to paint a more all-encompassing picture of students with multiple identities, tying together all of these identities with the core category. The core category is “defined as the contextual influences on the construction of identity,” which are defined as race, culture, gender, family, education, diverse relationships and religion (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p.408). The understanding of self and its definition is an important component of the model as it represents those elements of one’s identity that she most values. These aspects of identity are usually deeply personal and highly salient for the individual. The naming of this core identity is a very personal and introspective endeavor, connected to self-authorship (Jones, 2009). Self-authorship is often associated with the MMDI because it fortifies the concepts behind the framework, reinforcing the process of self-actualization and socially constructed aspects of identity. Contextually bound, whether these identities are salient or not is contingent upon the conditions they are situated in (Jones, 2009; Jones & McEwen, 2000). Family background, life experiences, career and life choices and social class status are all backdrops which can either amplify or silence saliency (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

While privilege and power paradigms are a component of this model, they are not as pervasive as they are in the intersectionality frameworks. Power and privilege are most prominent in those aspects of one’s identity that are not privileged in the schema of society (Jones & McEwen, 2000). While the intersectionality framework is entrenched in

the understanding of the connectivity and interaction between aspects of identity, the MMIDI is not as effective at achieving a more holistic approach. Elements of the theoretical framework still approach identity through compartmentalizing various salencies. While it does not seem that Jones and McEwen view having multiple identities as additive, a discussion of how the identities do more than merely co-exist is not expanded upon, thus hindering the framework's broader applicability.

### **African American Women--Race and Gender**

Although many women of color would define themselves in terms of their gender as well as their race/ethnicity, for African American women, gender can become secondary due to systemic challenges associated with their race (Jackson, 1998). Wedged in an identity purgatory, African American women must facilitate connecting both their racialized and gendered selves in order to be included in both the discourse surrounding African Americans as well as the discourse surrounding women (Hill Collins, 2000; Howard-Vital, 1989; Hurtado, 1996). According to Fordham (1993), in an academic setting, African American women must participate in gender passing in order to be viewed as intellectually legitimate. To be taken seriously, African American women must "...discard or at least minimize a female identity in a self-conscious effort to consume, or at least present the appearance of being, the male dominant "Other" (p. 4).

When looking critically at what womanhood means, Winkle-Wagner (2008) discovers that again women are in a tug-of-war between the dominant society's definition of womanhood and the cultural associations of what it means to be an African



American woman. Because African American women have to contend with societal stereotypes that they are “strong, hardworking, dominant, welfare queens, and sexually promiscuous” (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2012), they experience gendered racism. Coined by Sociologist Philomena Essed (1991), this occurs when African American women experience both racism and sexism at the same time (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood & Hunt, 2012). Often referred to as double jeopardy or double bind (Jackson, 1998), African American women devise strategies in order to succeed in spaces which present them with obstacles related to both their race and their gender (Jackson, 1998). Having to navigate these feelings of being discriminated against for their race and gender results in the internalization of significant amounts of stress which cannot be ameliorated but can be mitigated through spirituality and peer support. (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood & Hunt, 2012).

Because of the assumed predominance of race, it is impossible for African American women to ever view themselves as solely female separate and distinct from their skin color or ethnicity (Jackson, 1998). Jackson (1998), critiquing earlier studies on race and gender which argue that racial identity development has primacy over gender identity development asserts, “Neither study adequately considers the social situatedness of identity—the possibility that a woman’s identity may vary depending on the context she is in” (p. 172). Her perspective reminds us of the importance of context, both within the intersectionality discourse and the qualitative paradigm. While intersectionality would not concur that actualization of gender is context specific, understanding the situation surrounding identity development is critical in order to comprehend how it

develops more fully. While intersectionality research stems from research at the intersections of race and gender, it is important to recognize that even within this dichotomy, there is variation within groups. Homogenizing the interaction between race and gender disregards socioeconomic disparities, differences in nationality, or even differences in levels of educational attainment, relegating this discussion on intersections to a conversation on additive identities—the antithesis of intersectionality (Nash, 2008). While intersectionality is more expansive than simply race and gender, encompassing multiple other aspects of identity, its origins are grounded in research on the connectivity between race and gender. An exploration of this body of research, and its precursor—identity formation, is essential in contextualizing the discussion of this framework.

### **Intersectionality**

Coined by law professor Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality is born out of a critique of feminist theory and antiracist policies. Crenshaw believes that African American women and their unique voices were “theoretically erased” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140) by both the antiracist and feminist movements and intersectionality serves as a mechanism for African American women to liberate themselves and challenge oppression within their communities (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). Oppression and its impact on marginalized groups is a core idea of Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality and she develops intersectionality to give voice to what she perceives as the double oppression experienced by African American women (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). She highlights the complexities of being both African American as well as a woman and the impact that this “multiple subordination” has on this population (1991, p. 1251). Crenshaw insists,

“Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (1989, p. 140).

Intersectionality views identity as being mutually constitutive, meaning that each component of identity is interdependent on another (Bowleg, 2008). Shields (2008) discusses that identities mutually constitute when, “one category of identity, such as gender, takes its meaning as a category in relation to another category,” which is reinforced by, “a dynamic process in which the individual herself or himself is actively engaged” (p. 302). Rather than ranking identities or determining which one is situationally salient, intersectionality examines identity comprehensively and holistically (Nash, 2008). While the definition of intersectionality has expanded in the literature, no longer focusing on African American women exclusively (McCall, 2005), it is now also defined more broadly and encompasses the intersecting identities of race, gender, social class, religion, nationality and language (Berry, Jay & Lynn, 2010), and sexual orientation (Hancock, 2007). In more simplistic terms, intersectionality is the “processes through which multiple social identities converge and ultimately shape individual and group experiences” (Shields, 2008). In the more recent iterations of intersectionality, the idea of oppression is not as central as it is to Crenshaw’s definition. While understanding the dominant and subordinated identities possessed by the study’s participants is important to knowing who they are, it is not positioned as central. Shields’ more encompassing definition that focuses on the holistic aspects of identity is more pertinent to the experiences being discussed in this study.

**Structural intersectionality.** Pertinent to the higher education landscape is Crenshaw's discussion of structural intersectionality. In structural intersectionality, the intersecting social systems converge to impact the experiences of individuals (Crenshaw, 1991) Within the hyper political setting of a university, structural intersectionality occurs when racial and gender inequalities coalesce and negatively influence the experiences of underrepresented women (Museus & Griffin; 2011). Because both of these identities are subordinated the person's identity gets compartmentalized, and in the political landscape she is either a woman, or more often than not, she is viewed as an African American only. This disregard for either her race or her gender results in the fragmentation of her identity. By not acknowledging these dualities it results in an incomplete understanding of who the African American woman actually is, thereby inhibiting the university's ability to adequately serve her. While this study employs a more comprehensive understanding of intersectionality, one that addresses other elements of identity in addition to race and gender, it is important to acknowledge structural intersectionality for its potential relevance in the context of the academically elite institution. Jordan-Zachery (2007) indicates that in order to truly understand intersectionality, it must be contextualized as that allows for a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the group's experiences.

**Intersectional invisibility.** Intersectional invisibility occurs when people with multiple subordinated identities "do not fit the prototype of their constituent subordinate groups," and as a result they are not acknowledged as members of these communities (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008, p. 381). Because of androcentrism, heterocentrism,

and ethnocentrism, there is a premium placed on what it means to be male, heterosexual, and White and this also translates into the discourse on marginalized identities. This lack of recognition “relegates them to a position of acute social invisibility” (p.381). Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach (2008) indicate that when people fall into this category, as do all of the participants in this study, having their voices heard, acknowledged as important, and understood, is essential. Most groups who are designed to advocate for the needs of these underrepresented populations (e.g., African Americans or women) typically do not address the needs of those at the intersections (e.g., African American women or lesbian females). Instead, financial and human resources are placed on what is considered to be the prototype for that community such as African American males or White, heterosexual females (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Strolovitch, 2007). Although their research is not focused in the realm of education, it can easily be extrapolated to the higher education landscape.

**Intersectionality’s application.** Although there is not a significant body of extant literature on intersectionality and college students, Stewart’s (2008) research on African American students at a selective PWI in the Midwest is relevant. She interviews both men and women to determine how they see themselves and make meaning of their identities. Because of similarities in educational setting, Stewart’s work does inform this study however differences in methodological approach and her study’s emphasis on identity integration represent a different slant and subsequent analysis of the data. In the field of higher education, specifically Student Affairs, intersectionality is emerging as a mechanism to bridge the disconnect between theoretical frameworks and students’ lived

experiences. According to Torres, Jones and Renn (2009), “Intersectionality is a new heuristic that...brings together both the parts and the whole self as well as the individual in context” (p.585). Although the value of doing so is evident, the challenge lies in the application of intersectionality. Harper, Wardell, & McGuire (2011) suggest that understanding students’ complexities can facilitate improved teaching and create more inclusive campus climates. The difficulty lies in the ability to apply intersectionality broadly, especially at larger, more diverse institutions. The need to recognize students’ complex identities and serve them adequately remains a challenge with no foreseeable solution.

### **Summary**

Although the body of literature exclusively on African American women’s identity development at academically selective institutions is extremely narrow, there is varied and diverse research that speaks to elements of this collegiate experience. This assembled literature is foundational, laying the historical predicate for understanding the residential college system and identity development. It is contextual, situating the type of student that matriculates at academically selective colleges and universities and discussing their K-12 educational experiences as well as potential structural and systemic barriers into their integration into the undergraduate community. Finally, it establishes intersectionality as the lens through which this study should be examined, outlining its evolution, application, and methodological challenges. These methodological challenges, a more detailed discussion of the steps taken to mitigate

those challenges, as well as a detailing of the specifics of this study are examined in Chapter III.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **RESEARCH METHODS**

#### **Research Design**

The purpose of naturalistic inquiry is to generate research that makes meaning of a phenomenon by seeking to understand it more holistically (Geertz, 1973). With discovery serving as the motivator, qualitative research allows for multiple truths to emerge providing a voice to the experiences of those whom might otherwise be considered inconsequential (Josselson, 1995). By making space for the perspective of the individual, the outlier's perspective is viewed not only as integral but essential to understanding a phenomenon comprehensively (Creswell, 2006). In addition to the importance of representing diverse perspectives is the centrality of context. Situating the participants' experiences in the world surrounding them allows the context to further inform the findings, transforming the research by "making the world visible" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). To achieve this, qualitative inquiry employs various information gathering techniques, including interviews, field notes, observations, and document analysis to create a rich description of the subject being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Geertz, 1973). These varied methods allow the research to paint a fuller, more extensive picture of the phenomenon while also insuring that the participants' perspectives are comprehensively and accurately conveyed.

**Rationale for Qualitative Methodology.** These attributes of qualitative research facilitated the exploration of the experiences of African American women attending an academically selective university and the use of intersectionality in framing their identity



development. A qualitative research design was imperative in enabling the participants to construct their own understanding of their identity development. Qualitative inquiry allowed for the study's methodology to evolve based on information shared by the study's participants. This flexibility when paired with the amorphous nature of intersectionality, was critical in that it allowed for the researcher to insure that the integrity associated with the participants' perspectives was maintained. Creating a transparency within the process and fostering a relationship with the participants was essential in creating an environment in which the participants felt as if they were in control of their stories. The study's qualitative design provided the freedom to allow the study to evolve as the women's needs dictated, truly placing the researcher in the passenger seat and allowing the participants to drive the data collection process.

This study also sought to illuminate the voices of African American college women and contribute to the extent literature on the undergraduate experience, especially at academically selective institutions. Qualitative research's commitment to providing a space for those who have been previously silenced, marginalized or disregarded is never more evident than in those postmodern facets of the qualitative community, including gender and sexuality studies, critical race theory, and ethnic studies. These varied approaches were foundational in the conception of this study's research design.

### **Statement of the Research Questions**

In order to gain a deeper understanding of African American college women's identity development, the study focuses on a series of research questions:

1) How has the identity development of African American women attending an academically selective university been shaped by their both their pre-college and in-college experiences?

2) How do African American undergraduate women's identities develop in this educational context and how do they make meaning of them?

3) In what ways has the navigation of their complex identities influenced African American women's ability to integrate into the Brooks University campus community?

### **Rationale for Intersectionality**

Many identity theoretical frameworks, when compartmentalized by race, gender, sexual orientation or even context (i.e. college student, adolescence, etc.), feature some form of stage or status evolution. As various identity models demonstrate, whether linear or fluid, there are benchmarks or stages analogous with most that illustrate how some aspect of one's identity is constructed. When looking at identity through the lens of intersectionality, these benchmarks are absent as intersectionality hinges on the relationship between and among aspects of one's self. At the heart of intersectionality and critical to the study's research design is the researcher's vigilance at insuring that the participants' identities are not viewed through an additive lens. When looked at in this way, identity is perceived as a fragment of the whole self, with each subordinated identity amplifying the other (Bowleg, 2008; Hancock, 2007). In discussing the experiences of individuals with multiple subordinated identities such as African American females, identities are often portrayed as overlapping with each subordinate

identity being layered on and in turn increasing the individual's oppression (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Methodological challenges abound when employing intersectionality as a theoretical framework. To even refer to it as a framework is somewhat of a misnomer as it is not truly a framework but more accurately described as a pathway to understanding the complexity of identity. Hancock asserts intersectionality is both a “normative theoretical argument and an approach to conducting empirical research that emphasizes the interaction of difference (including but not limited to race, gender, class, and sexual orientation)” (Hancock, 2007, pp. 63-64). From terminology and categorization (McCall, 2005) to issues around devising interview questions and making assumptions during data analysis which are not additive in nature (Bowleg, 2008; Stewart, 2012), deciphering how others make meaning of their identity and portraying it accurately when considering this approach is complex. The research design and subsequent data analysis must determine how to circumvent the additive impulse by framing questions about the women's experiences in ways which are “...intersecting, interdependent, and mutually constitutive (Bowleg, 2008, p. 314),” and should emphasize “...more meaningful constructs such as stress, prejudice, and discrimination rather than relying on demographic questions alone (p. 315).” In an attempt to capture this complexity, the study's research design employed photo journaling and photo-elicitation interviews in addition to traditional interviews to facilitate the participants' construction of their own realities while enabling them to reveal who they were utilizing images and ideas of their own choosing. Although qualitative research should always be driven by the voice of

the participants, when employing a framework such as intersectionality, the researcher truly must embrace this concept and allow the participants to dictate how and what information is shared. The methodological fluidity which intersectionality necessitates extended to all elements of research design, including those more formalized such as developing interview questionnaires and the coding of data to those informal elements such as how the researcher explained the photo-journaling process to participants.

### **Research Paradigm: Case Study**

A single site case study was selected as the research paradigm for this study because of Brooks University's unique positioning compared to its peer institutions and the importance of context within this research tradition. The case study emphasizes retention of the "holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" or phenomena such as "individual life cycles" (Yin, 2009, p. 4). As this study aimed to uncover how African American women made meaning of their identity development while in an elite higher education environment, the case study was effective both as a unit of study and a methodological process. According to Yin (2003), "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident"(p. 18). While the theoretical framework centered on the intersections between the complex components of African American college women's identity and the subsequent meaning assigned to this understanding, the fact that the participants are currently situated at an academically elite, predominately White university is critical in understanding their identity development. As discussed in more

detail later in this chapter, compared to its peer institutions, Brooks University is distinctive in its culture, size, and structure. All of these components have a significant impact on the experiences of its student body, specifically the African American women participating in this study who attend the institution and engage in this unique, bounded context.

### **Site Selection**

This study focused exclusively on the experiences of African American, undergraduate women attending a small, private, and predominately White, academically selective university situated in the Southwest United States. Brooks University (pseudonym) has an overall undergraduate and graduate student population of more than 6000 students and admits approximately 1,100 new freshmen and transfer students each year of which approximately 7% is African American. Very academically competitive, on average Brooks University admits only 15% of its more than 11,000 applicants. Situated in a large, diverse, metropolitan city of more than 2 million people, Brooks University is not the only college or university in the city, but it is the only academically selective institution.

Predominately White, academically selective colleges and universities, also referred to as elite universities in the literature (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Massey, Charles, Lundy & Fischer, 2003), are among the most highly rated universities in publications such as the U.S. News and World Report. Standardized test scores such as the SAT and the ACT are still the primary indicator utilized to determine institution selectivity (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Flowers, Osterlind, Pascarella &

Pierson, 2001; Rumberger & Thomas, 1993); however, the factors utilized by the U.S. News and World Report of academic reputation, faculty and financial resources, student selectivity, retention, alumni giving and graduation rate performances are all still integral to the selectivity equation.

Not limited to one type or size of institution, academically selective institutions run the gamut, encompassing both small liberal arts colleges such as Bryn Mawr College or Smith College and mammoth, research-intensive public institutions such as The University of Michigan or University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. On most of these campuses, African American students find integral support networks in either ethnicity specific cultural centers or through their involvement in historically African American fraternities and sororities, both of which play significant roles in facilitating students' racial identity development and overall sense of belonging and connection to the campus (Solórzano, Ceja & Yasso, 2001). Because the case study site is an institution which does not have a cultural center or culturally specific Greek lettered organizations, the site served as an important and unique backdrop in which to observe the identity development of the participants. While race is only one of the identity complexities explored in this study, it is often the attribute that is most easily identified by colleges or universities and it is more likely than its counterparts (sexual orientation, gender, religion, class, etc.) to have institutional resources dedicated to supporting this population.

## **Brooks University: Campus Context**

Every new student at Brooks University is assigned to a residential college where she lives for the duration of her undergraduate career unless she elects to move off campus. Although a student may no longer be physically living on campus, she still maintains her status as a member of her residential college. Based on the Oxford and Cambridge traditions, the residential college is the ultimate living/learning community. Historically, the original intent of the residential college was to create an environment in which students were always together, “to eat, sleep, study, play, and worship together, make friends, compete against each other and learn to stand on their own two feet, in loyalty always to the larger community”(Thelin, 2004, p. 8). Although students at Brooks University do not take all of their classes in their residential colleges like their colonial counterparts, much of the organization and greater purpose of the college system has remained intact. Unlike culturally themed or academic discipline specific housing which many academically selective institutions offer, Brooks strives to insure that every residential college represents the overall diversity of the institution. Students of varying majors, gender, geographic location, and ethnic backgrounds are divided proportionally across the residential colleges. Predominately residential, more than half of all Brooks students live on campus throughout their undergraduate career.

More than simply a place to sleep or have meals, the residential college system at Brooks University is central in shaping the institution’s culture, the undergraduate experience, and the overall campus community. Residential colleges serve as home base for many students, providing a safe space for them to cultivate relationships with peers,

to receive support from faculty and staff members, and to begin the personal exploration endemic to the undergraduate experience. Many undergraduate students feel an exceptionally strong allegiance to their residential college, associating more strongly with it than with the institution as a whole. It is important to note that although this strong sense of community can be empowering for some students, for others it can be challenging to engage with the broader institution should they not feel a strong connection to their residential college communities as they are positioned as the first and primary vehicles of connection with the university.

### **Data Sources**

**Participants.** Engaging diverse data sources is important in that it can assist the researcher in the development and “illustration of themes”(Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 210). In this study, employing various data methods generated a deeper understanding of the information being shared by the participants and in many cases was a necessity in helping the researcher fully understand the complexity of intersectionality and the participants’ identity development. In order to triangulate the data, varied sources were used including interviews, document analysis, and photo-journaling. Both traditional interviews as well as photo-elicitation interviews were conducted to glean more extensive information from the participants. Some participants were also willing to share personal journals, providing additional insight into their photo-journaling experiences and highlighting their reaction to the process of documenting identity in this way.



**Sample selection.** Because of the specific nature and population targeted in this study, purposive sampling was utilized. Purposive sampling is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned”(Merriam, 2009, p. 71). Initially, the researcher anticipated that the target sample size would be unachievable using only purposeful sampling and had intended to use snowball sampling as well. Snowball sampling is a type of purposive sampling in which an initial pool of participants is selected based on specific criteria and they in-turn assist the researcher in increasing the sample by making referrals of other participants who meet the requirements for the study (Patton, 2002). Once the initial inquiry was sent to students meeting the study’s requirements, the response was sufficient and snowball sampling was no longer necessary.

Three African American women between the ages of 19 and 22 were selected for the research study. The sample size was restricted to three participants to allow for prolonged interaction with each of the women. A critique of case study research is the lack of generalizability associated with looking closely at the experiences of a very specific, potentially small population. However, the intent of examining a specific case and the experiences of its participants is not to generalize whatever phenomena they have experienced but rather to “...expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization)” (Yin, 1989, p. 21). As mentioned earlier, Brooks University is a very small institution with an even smaller African American student population. After eliminating the male students from

the potential sample, in a given year approximately 35 African American women would meet the sample criteria. Although the sample size is still small comparatively, the study was able to gather “information rich” data from its participants through the use of various data collection methods. Patton (2002) elucidates, “The validity, insights and meaning generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (p. 245). Much of the discussion driving a larger sample size stems from the research community’s desire to generalize the results generated from a case study which is in many ways, counter to qualitative research.

Participants had completed at least two years of coursework at Brooks University and were classified as either juniors or seniors. Each of them matriculated at the institution as freshmen and had spent their entire undergraduate experience at the university. This afforded them a larger body of experiences to reflect upon when considering their impact on the participants’ identity development. It was important that all participants had spent the entirety of their undergraduate tenure at Brooks University, making transfer students ineligible for the study, because the institution’s environment provided the specific context for how participants made meaning of their identities. The participants’ academic interests were diverse, representing humanities, social science, and hard science. Two of the participants were out-of-state students, living in the Deep South and the Northeast prior to coming the college. The third participant was native to the city where Brooks University is located however she had been living in the Midwest in the years prior to her application to Brooks. Given that the population of Brooks

University is roughly proportional between students native to the state and those from outside the state (domestic and international), the study's participants were reflective of the institution's geographic diversity.

**Interviewing.** Interviewing is an important element of qualitative research as it allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the participants' vantage point, making their perspectives "...meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (Patton, 1990, p. 278). All interviews were conducting using a topic specific interview guide or a guided conversation (Patton, 1990) as a framework. In the interview guide format, topics to be covered are outlined but the researcher has the ability to explore and probe, asking follow-up questions as needed to gain the most information possible on a particular subject (Patton, 1990). When inquiring about the participants' identity development, this fluid format allowed for the researcher's line of questioning to evolve with the participant, moving effortlessly in whatever direction the participant's voice directed. Patton asserts that the interview guide format facilitates the "...building of a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style"(p. 283). Given the importance of developing a strong rapport with the participants, utilizing an interview guide approach helped by cultivating a relaxed interaction between researcher and participant which translated into more personal, revealing dialogue. Interactive interviewing was also utilized to establish the interviewing process as an exchange between the researcher and the participant. Characterized by the exchanging of narratives, Hays & Singh (2009) frame this type of interview as "...complex narratives that look at what happened and the interviewee's

reflection and interpretation of those experiences. In addition to the content shared in the interview, the interpretation of that content by the interviewee and the complex interactions between the interviewee and interviewer—including the social and historical context of narratives—are addressed” (p. 238). Because many of the participants employed story-telling as a means of sharing their identity development experiences, encouraging participants to not only recount these narratives but to analyze them was central in deriving the participants’ own understanding of these experiences.

**Use of reflexive photography.** The use of photography in qualitative research can be impactful, assisting those who utilize it in creating their own narrative and in communicating the meaning behind the phenomenon they are experiencing (Cole & Knowles, 2008; Hays & Singh, 2012). The use of reflexive photography was especially important for this study because of its connection to the theoretical framework. The aim of reflexive photography is to mirror or “reflect back” how the photographer understands herself, her world, and its context (Harper, 1998). The complexity of intersectionality coupled with the participants’ membership in an underrepresented group situated on the campus of a predominately White university, made photographs invaluable for their ability to convey ideas that may have otherwise gone unspoken. According to Harper (1998), “Photographs can be read to understand nuances of interaction, presentations of self, and relations among people to their material environments” (p. 61). When understanding intersecting identities, the context in which they are situated in is paramount as it can significantly impact saliency—both what the individual perceives as salient as well as what others perceive as salient for that individual. Photography

emphasized the important of context and environment, as it situated the participants' experience, revealing to the researcher not only a deeper understanding of how the women perceived themselves, but also how they made meaning of self in the context of their environment.

### **Data Collection**

**Entry.** Native to the site as I was employed there while conducting the study, it became critical for me to identify a gatekeeper at the university who could provide me with access to the desired participants for my study. Colleagues within the Office of Multicultural Affairs were able to assist with the initial inquiry to participants. The Director of the office had been on staff at Brooks University for more than 30 years and had served as an advisor to the campus' various cultural student organizations. Her rapport with students of color, especially African American students, was well known across campus and I believed that her connection with the project would positively influence some students to participate in the study. The Director was notified of the study's purpose and research questions and was asked to disseminate an e-mail to all potential participants as well as to personally identify any students she had worked with that also met the study's inclusion criteria. I followed up directly with interested participants via e-mail. After explaining the specifics of my study in more detail, including the anticipated time commitment, three participants agreed to move forward with the interview and photo-journaling process.

**Introductory interviewing protocol.** An initial informational interview, ranging in length from 60 to 90 minutes, was conducted with each of the participants. The

purpose of the initial interview was to begin building rapport with the participants, to learn more about their current experiences on campus, and to discuss their pre-college experiences including K-12 education, family unit, pre-college understanding of identity, and messages about education. Using Patton's interview guide as a framework, conversational interview questions were developed utilizing several overarching topical areas as guides. Initial interviews were conducted at neutral sites selected by the participants in an attempt to create an environment in which they would be comfortable sharing information about themselves. During this initial interview, specific information about the photo-journaling process was also given to each participant.

**Photo-journaling protocol.** Using digital cameras, participants were instructed to take photographs that illustrated who they are and how they define themselves. While participants were provided with a series of questions (See Appendix A) to consider regarding their identity development, those were intended to serve as a starting place for the participants if needed. The prompts were not designed to limit the scope of the pictures as the intent of this portion of the study was for the participants to be truly self-directed and intentional in determining which images to take and how to represent themselves. From an epistemological standpoint, when utilizing photographs as a data collection medium, participants and researchers are "partners and collaborators in the research process...as they define the scope of analysis by identifying the issues themselves" (Schulze, 2007, p. 539). Over a seven to ten day period, participants could take as few or as many photos as they deemed necessary to communicate how they defined "self." Participants were instructed to take photographs of items or images that

they viewed as central to their self-definition as opposed to images of people.

Restricting the participants' use of people in this process was intentional in the research design. If photographs had contained identifiable images of people in the participants' lives, photo releases would have been required for each individual in the photos. Not only would securing releases have proven to be cumbersome for the participants, it could have proven to be a detriment to the more organic nature of the photo-journaling process. While some participants referenced the difficulty this restriction posed, it was established to encourage them to be thoughtful in their image selection while searching for concepts and items that still revealed their sense of self.

**Participants' photo-journaling methodology.** Photographs played an important role in breaking down the barriers between the researcher and the participants. Although the participants were generally forthcoming and willing to share in their initial interview, the process of taking photos and the subsequent photo-elicitation interview afforded the women the opportunity to reveal more about themselves and what they valued. The value of utilizing photographs as a mechanism to elucidate identity was understood from the study's outset. What was unanticipated was the ways in which the methodology employed by the participants would inform their understanding of identity and in turn how this profound understanding would be communicated to the researcher.

While participants were provided with photo-journaling prompts that they could elect to use if desired, no structured guidelines were provided by the researcher for the photo-journaling process itself. Intentional on the part of the researcher, it was thought that forcing the participants to develop their own methodology for the photo-journaling

process would deepen the self-direction component of the process, the women's understanding of their identity, and the intentionality with which they conveyed these images. As a result, the women had to make the following key decisions during the photo-journaling process:

- 1) What do I want to communicate about my identity and how do I reveal that?  
How do I see myself?
- 2) What images correlate with what I elect to communicate?
- 3) Will my photos explicitly or implicitly communicate these values?

All of the participants utilized a process that contained both planned and organic elements. For some photographs, the women indicated that they were intentional in capturing either a particular picture of something or a specific image that encapsulated an element of their identity. Rebellion Seeker (pseudonym) indicated that she had taken a photograph from the same perspective three times in order to get the precise image she had in mind. Others of the participants' shots evolved organically and were often taken impulsively, photographed as the women went through their everyday lives and encountered images that they felt effectively conveyed their identity.

Each of the women was asked about the photo-journaling process and all indicated that they found it to be extremely difficult using photographs as the medium to communicate identity. Brenda indicated that she had to restart the photo-journaling process when she realized that she was overthinking it, trying to assess what she thought the researcher wanted to see rather than selecting images that were central to her own identity.



**Photo-elicitation interviewing.** After participating in the photo-journaling, photo-elicitation interviews were conducted with each of the participants, allowing them the opportunity to provide context to their photographs and interpret their meaning. These interviews ranged in length from 60 to 120 minutes. Participants were asked to select no more than ten photographs to discuss in depth during the interview process. The participants were asked to narrow down the number of photographs to be discussed so that they would select those photographs which held the most significance for them personally and best illustrated who they were. Because the photographs were printed off by the researcher after the participants uploaded them to a secure file-sharing website, the researcher supplied hard copies of the photographs for discussion at the photo-elicitation interview. On average no more than three days had elapsed between when the women uploaded the photographs and when the photo-elicitation interview occurred.

When looking at the photographs again, participants were given their stack of images and asked to sequence the photos in an order of their choosing. This was done in order to insure that the participants were telling the story that they intended to tell as well as to communicate to them that they were driving this interview, sharing their own thoughts, ideas, and perspectives with minimal influence from the researcher. When conducting research using intersectionality as the framework, it is essential that the researcher does not lead the participants and assume an aspect of identity's saliency or primacy in the participants' lives. As a result, participants Brenda and Reagan chose to reorder the photographs, discussing them in a very specific sequence while Rebellion Seeker indicated that the order was unimportant and elected to keep the photos in the

random order she received them in. In addition to providing insight into the photos selected for the interview, participants also were asked to examine a collage of their photographs randomly organized by the researcher. While not created by the participants, the researcher thought this would give the participants the opportunity to look at their pictures holistically and provide input on how their photos might communicate identity as a collective entity.

The benefits of utilizing visual research methods, such as photography, are that they “provide participants with an opportunity to express themselves in a nonverbal manner that may access deeper aspects of their understanding and/or experience of a phenomenon” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 278). Photo-elicitation interviews served as important follow-ups to this process, affording participants the opportunity to explain the “why” behind the photo, thus enhancing the researcher’s understanding of the participants’ experience. Rebellion Seeker was especially focused on explaining the meaning behind her photographs. Initially somewhat detached from her photos, Rebellion Seeker admitted that she took many of the photos with very little intentionality, choosing to snap photographs as she interacted with the world. As the interview progressed however, she grew increasingly introspective. It became evident that Rebellion Seeker was analyzing each photo and searching for its deeper meaning, at times noticing things in the photo which directly related to her concept of self, but that she had not intentionally placed in the shot. When asked about the process of photo-journaling, Rebellion Seeker responds:

So photo-journaling was interesting in retrospect, just because you're looking at it, and it's like, "Wow, what was I thinking?" And I know that what I was thinking then is probably not what I'm thinking now. Not only because it is later in the day, but I'm also a different person [than] I was on that day, even if only minorly...maybe just a little.

Additionally, photo-elicitation interviews can facilitate the connection of one's own definition of self to a broader context such as society or culture (Harper, 2002). This connection to the context was especially important for these participants since one of the aims of the study was to ascertain whether such a connection existed between the participants' identity development and their current environment--the academically selective institution. Reagan and Brenda's photographs reflected the meaning in their environment as each woman used elements of Brooks University as a backdrop for some of their photographs.

**Managing data.** All interviews were tape-recorded using a digital recording. Detailed transcriptions were made of each interview and then provided to the participant for their review. It was during this part of the research process that the participants selected a pseudonym to use for the duration of the study. All data collected as a part of this study, including but not limited to interview transcriptions, printed copies of photographs, and other documents including journal documents, reflexive journals, and audit trails were stored in a secured cabinet located in the researcher's home.

## **Data Analysis Strategies**

Pattern coding (Stake, 1995) was initially used for data analysis in order to make meaning of the diverse types of data generated by this study. When pattern coding, the researcher “examines broad categories within the case for their relationships or interactions”(Hays & Singh, 2012, p.300). Pattern coding has three central functions as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994):

- a. It results in data reduction, compressing significant amounts of data into smaller chunks of information.
- b. Data analysis begins during data collection, strengthening the relationship between the researcher and the data.
- c. It enables the researcher to develop a cognitive map, allowing her to better understand the relationships and interactions and organize these thematically.

This form of inductive analysis was determined to be the most effective in organizing the information generated from the participants’ experiences. Because of the significant number of pattern codes generated from the participants, it became necessary to also utilize meta coding which further connected the relationship between themes as well as across participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A critique of intersectionality is whether there should be any categorization employed when using this framework as a mode of analysis. Because the compartmentalization of separate aspects of identity is the antithesis of intersectionality, does the spirit of this framework get undermined when forced into traditional modes of data analysis? The anticategorical scholarship ascertains that because categories are

socially constructed and are not “real,” the “...methodological consequence of categorizing is inherently problematic...as it inevitably leads to demarcation, and demarcation to exclusion, and exclusion to inequality” (McCall, 2005, p. 1777). For the purpose of this study, it was important to be mindful that categories are largely social in their construction, yet it was also critical to create a mechanism by which the participants’ experiences could be organized and contextualized. As highlighted by McCall (2005), “The point is not to deny the importance—both material and discursive—of categories but to focus on the process by which they are produced, experienced, reproduced, and resisted in everyday life”(p. 1783). Establishing data generated codes rather than a priori coding was a necessary element of the data analysis process as it allowed for the creation of terminology and ideas around identity that were largely participant rather than researcher driven.

**Trustworthiness.** When a study establishes trustworthiness, the researcher has exhausted several means to insure that the study’s design, interpretation of the findings, and protocol accurately reflects the voice of the study’s participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) establish a body of criteria that a researcher can follow in order to insure that their study is trustworthy. When examining the study’s design, they pose the following four critical questions that should assist the researcher in determining whether trustworthiness has been established:

- 1) Can the researcher establish confidence in the “truth” of the findings?
- 2) Has the researcher determined if the findings have applicability in other contexts?

- 3) Could the findings be repeated upon replication of the study provided that the participants and the study's context were the same or similar?
- 4) Has the researcher maintained a neutral stance in which the findings were driven by the participants' responses rather than researcher bias? (p. 290)

These ideas translate into the trustworthiness criteria of credibility, confirmability, and transferability and the associated methods utilized to insure their presence in a study. Credibility or internal validity examines the believability of the research (Hays & Singh, 2012) and assesses the accuracy of the phenomenon being discussed by the researcher. This study used a variety of methods to establish credibility, including triangulation of the data methods, peer debriefing, and member checking. Confirmability is defined as "the degree to which findings of a study are genuine reflections of the participants investigated" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 201). The audit trail and reflexive journal served as important checks and balances for the researcher, allowing the researcher to maintain both physical evidence associated with the study as well as her reactions and responses throughout the data collection process. Transferability is achieved through the use of thick description in which the researcher provides extensive details of the research process as well as the data itself (Hays & Singh, 2012).

**Triangulation.** Denzin (1978) outlines four elements intrinsic to triangulation, which include the use of varied methods, data sources, researchers and/or theories to substantiate a study's findings. This study utilized diverse sources and methods to triangulate the information shared by the participants. The study's sampling method

involved the recruitment of multiple participants who met the study's criteria. Although there were some overarching commonalities, each participant spoke to the phenomenon of identity development through her own life lens. By also asking participants to participate in both face-to-face interviews as well as to photo-journal, the women had multiple vehicles through which they could communicate their understanding of self. When a variety of sources are employed, the study is buoyed by the multiplicity of information and can "...overcome the intrinsic bias that comes from single-methods, single-observer, and single-theory studies"(Denzin, 1970, p. 313). As initially outlined when examining the study's use of photos and photo-elicitation interviewing, these more organic and participant derived data sources aid in the triangulation process. Not only do they help to substantiate ideas already asserted by the participant via another data source, but these data sources provide important context and understanding to ideas that might have otherwise remained unexplored.

**Peer debriefing.** Analyst triangulation, in the form of peer debriefing, was also utilized. As defined by Lincoln and Guba(1985), peer debriefing is another essential technique in the establishing of credibility as it allows for potential research bias to be uncovered by a peer who is not connected to the data. By introducing the role of a "Devil's Advocate" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308) peer debriefing "provides essential accountability in the effort to recognize and understand the influence of the researcher on the interpretation of the data" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 151). Additionally, peer debriefing has an important secondary function as it allows the researcher to "test working hypothesis" as they develop during the coding process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985,

p.308). Because of the researcher's positionality and her personal and professional connections to the participants' experiences, employing peer debriefing as a triangulation technique was especially essential. Two sets of peer debriefers were engaged, one set which was native to Brooks University and was familiar with the campus context, and a second set which was external to the university but was familiar with the experiences of African American undergraduate women. Each group of peer debriefers was asked to look closely at the transcriptions and coding procedures for undue researcher influence.

**Member checking.** Member checking engages participants in the process of insuring the study's trustworthiness by asking them to review interviews or other materials associated with their portrayal to insure their accuracy and authenticity (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The study's participants reviewed a comprehensive transcription of each of their interviews and were asked to make corrections, updates or clarifications to the document. Additional discussion occurred between the researcher and the participants that centered on gaining a better understanding of what the participant was trying to communicate both explicitly and implicitly. This clarifying conversation was central in maintaining the integrity of the participants' voices as they understood them. Given the interpretivist nature of qualitative research, reviewing interview or document analysis data with the participants through member checks, afforded the women with the opportunity to modify the information so that it more accurately reflected their perspective (Merriam, 2009). All of the participants made slight modifications to their transcripts and while none redacted any information initially



provided, all shared clarifying information in an attempt to further explain phenomena or to add depth to a narrative. In addition to credibility, member checking helped to insure that the participants' perspective and voice were accurately portrayed. Slang, pauses, and colloquial speech were maintained both in the transcriptions as well as by the participants. Presenting participants' voices accurately also help insure that the study's authenticity was upheld.

**Reflexive journaling.** Creating a reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1995) develops a back-story to the research process told from the vantage point of the researcher. Reflexive journaling throughout the data collection process was valuable, serving as an outlet for ideas and reactions generated during the interview process. While journaling, I took note of the participants' responses and reactions throughout the duration of the study, including their non-verbal forms of communication such as body language and facial expressions. After each interview, I also logged my own impressions of the conversation, including any non-verbal responses to questions. Lincoln and Guba (2005) emphasize the importance of hearing the participants, including their "paralinguistic cues, the lapses, pauses, stops, starts, and reformulations" (p. 209) all of which are their own forms of communication, rich with meaning. Factoring those into the data collection and analysis is central to the holistic understanding of the women's experiences. This type of journaling assisted me in bracketing my bias and allowed for the exploration of my own experiences in order "to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23).

**Thick description.** Conducting various types of interviews and the incorporation of photos into the study's design also facilitated the development of a thick description of the findings. Thick description entails more than the inclusion of enhanced details about the experiences or feelings of a participant. It contextualizes the action, fortifying the observations and occurrences provided by the participants into that which communicates deeper insight into their thoughts, feelings, and actions (Denzin, 1989). Thick description has the capability of surpassing facts and observations and providing inference into the meaning behind the participant's words (Singh & Hayes, 2012), however when using intersectionality as a framework, it is essential that the researcher tempers this capability to insure that the researcher's voice is not superimposed over the participant's voice.

### **Voice**

While there was the need to provide participants with varied mediums through which they can convey their understanding of their own identities, measures also had to be taken to insure that the participants' voices were being respected and reported as accurately as possible. As Mazzei (2009) asserts:

In our zeal to 'capture voices' and make meaning...we often seek that voice which we can easily name, categorize, and respond to...We seek a voice that maps onto our ways of knowing, understanding, and interpreting. A more productive practice, however would be to seek the voice that escapes our easy classification and that does not make easy sense—the voice in the crack. (p. 48)

For participants in this study, there may have been aspects of their identity that did not discuss or which were not as salient for them. When using intersectionality as a framework and trying to be mindful of maintaining the participants' voice, the researcher must suspend her innate desire to immediately classify and organize the information received from the participants. It was essential to allow the participants to guide the conversation, leading the researcher to understanding how they defined themselves. It is also important to note that this study does not attempt to unify the voices of its participants into a singular narrative that represents a unified truth. As Guba and Lincoln (2005) address when referencing a "crisis of representation," relating to voice, to collapse the participants' perspectives is counter to the purpose of voice which is, "to search for, retrieve, and liberate" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009, p. 2). While data analysis methods were employed to make the expansive data manageable, the participants' narratives remain distinctive in spite of some of the common threads that emerged and connected the dots between their experiences.

### **Researcher's Positionality**

As the researcher for this project, it was important to acknowledge my positionality and connection both to the participants as well as to the institution itself. Reflexivity is a validation strategy centered on self-analysis and reflection and the evaluation of the roles of power and privilege in research (Pillow, 2003). In a study centered on identity, I would be remiss if I did not seek to understand the impact the varied identities I hold had on those involved in this study. I am an African American woman who as an undergraduate attended a predominately White, academically

competitive university, although not academically elite as defined by this study. My undergraduate years were pivotal in my own identity development and it was during this time that I began to understand myself in a gendered and racialized context. I devoted little time to understanding how the intersection of my identities impacted my decision-making as discovering my racialized self was more personally urgent. As a result, my experiences and those of my participants were not identical. It was however, critical for me to be conscious of not making any assumptions about what identities were or were not salient for the participants. Although they elected to participate in this study because on some level they identified as African American, I had to remain cognizant that race saliency for them may be fluid or that self-knowledge of their own racial identity may be very divergent from my own ways of knowing.

Because the qualitative approach essentializes the understanding of the participant's experience, the researcher must be both self-critical and self-evaluative of her own perspective. This became even more important to me because of the anticipated tenuous separation of experiences between the participants and myself. In phenomenology, this practice is referred to as *epoche*, "...the practice of bracketing of one's own experiences from those of the interview partners. The purpose of this self-examination is to permit the researcher to gain clarity from his own preconceptions, and it is part of the ongoing process rather than a single fixed event" (Patton, 1990, p. 408). Because the expectation is that this process of self-evaluation is ongoing throughout the research process, reflexive journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1995) became critical in the ongoing exploration of my own positionality prior, during, and after the study.

While conducting this study, I was also employed at Brooks University as a mid-level professional and was aware that some participants in my study might experience difficulty separating my role as an administrator from my role as a graduate student researcher. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), some of the challenges a researcher can encounter when studying a native site include, “The expectations of the researcher based on familiarity with the setting and the people, the transition to researcher from a more familiar role within the setting, ethical and political dilemmas, the risk of uncovering potentially damaging knowledge, and struggles with closure” (pp. 100-101). I attempted to mitigate some of these pitfalls associated with the potential power dynamic by clarifying my role for the participants and establishing that I was not serving as an agent of the institution during the research process. For the introductory interview, it was important to meet at neutral sites to facilitate the student’s understanding that this project was not an extension of my professional function at the university. Additionally, it was necessary to establish a personal relationship with the participants, even sharing my own experiences with them, in order to position myself as more of an insider or at the very least, a person who would be empathetic to their voice. As Toma (2000) asserts, a high degree of transparency between the researcher and the phenomenon being studied can yield a level of intensity and “subjective understanding” resulting in a higher quality of qualitative data.

### **Summary**

Developing a study utilizing intersectionality as its premise while insuring that the data construction and interpretation is participant rather than researcher driven is as

complex as the identities it attempts to elucidate. It is an imperfect process, but one which is strengthened when the bracketing of the researcher's positionality, an insistence on maintaining participant voice, and a more fluid methodological design are kept at the fore while employing alternative, participant centered data collection methods. The use of photographs, photo-elicitation interviewing, and a more conversational interviewing style were essential in building rapport and creating a space in which the participants could construct their own definitions of self with minimal influence from the researcher. As evidenced in Chapter IV, these elements of the study coupled with the participants' voices, were interwoven to create narratives that allowed for a deeper understanding of the three women and their unique and intersectional perspectives.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to uncover how African American women make meaning of their identity development while in an academically elite higher education environment. The study gives voice to the various intersecting aspects of the women's identities, looking closely at these complex relationships and the ways in which navigating these intersecting identities influences or informs the participants' experiences on the Brooks University campus.

The data reveals that the identity development of the study's participants is influenced by a constellation of factors prior to their arrival at Brooks University. Their families have a significant influence on their early perceptions of themselves as racialized, gendered, spiritual, and academically high-achieving. In many cases, their family members are the first to define these attributes for the participants. As a result, much of the participants' undergraduate experience is spent either corroborating or dismantling these familial messages. Their peers are also a pervasive and important influence on the participants' identity development, both those relationships that are cultivated prior to college as well as during college. The undergraduate experience itself serves as an important catalyst that in many cases ignites the women's identity development, creating a space in which the participants could define themselves on their own terms. Equally as important as the role of the institution in identity development is the internal messages each of the women contend with. These internal voices or self-

tapes are significant in their ability to impact the course of the participants' identity development in both positive and negative ways.

This chapter opens with a discussion of the participants' profiles, including an overview of their general demographic information (Table 3.1), relevant familial background, and additional information about their educational history. This section is foundational, as it creates a snapshot of the background experiences that inform many of the participants' later decisions. It lays the predicate for the more detailed discussion of each participant that further connects her life experiences to data gathered during the collection process. This chapter also incorporates the participants' words whenever possible to insure that their voices remain primary as the findings unfold. By placing their voices at the forefront, it also helps position the participants' understanding of themselves as primary rather than the researcher's interpretation of the participants' identity construction. This chapter concludes with an examination of the commonalities between the participants' experiences. Four primary themes, *Familial Influence*, *Peer Influence*, *College as an Activator*, and *The Internal Narrative*, each with its own subsequent subthemes, emerged from the data.

### **Selection of Pseudonyms**

The participants are given the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms with no parameters placed on the names they selected. After looking closely at the names chosen by each participant, it is evident that they select names which reflect their values and perceptions of self. Brenda's family is central in her identity development, both in her early pre-college years as well as indirectly throughout her undergraduate



experience. Her sisters and mother form a strong core nucleus of support for Brenda and their messages of support, tenacity, and persistence fortify her academic drive, helping Brenda reach her goals. Brenda's mother and her influence on Brenda's life is discussed extensively throughout her interview process. As additional evidence of her parent's impact, Brenda selects her mother's name as her pseudonym. Reagan speaks extensively of her emerging sexuality and the impact that it has on her identity development. Evident both in her interviews as well as in the photographs that she selects to share in the study, Reagan's exploration of her sexual identity facilitates the redefinition of multiple aspects of self. Her selection of a gender neutral name speaks to who she is in this pivotal moment in which she is in the process of asserting her identity and establishing who she would like to be outside of the confines of others' definitions. The only participant to choose a name also associated with an action, Rebellion Seeker's choice of a pseudonym clearly reflects her desire to be different and to do that which is unexpected. Although she references being defined by others as an outlier extensively throughout both interviews, Rebellion Seeker's selection of this alias is also indicative of her reclamation of the outlier moniker and her assertion of it as something positive and defining for her.

### **The Photographs**

While the process each participant uses to take her photographs is outlined in a previous chapter, looking holistically at the set of photographs captured by each of the participants communicates important messages about who they are and what they value. Although only a few photos are discussed in greater detail in this chapter, the

photographs afford the participants an artistic and visual format through which they can illustrate who they are. Examining the body of photographs for Rebellion Seeker, Brenda, and Reagan as three individual collections helps to set the tone for understanding their identity development. Each of the participants is asked to select no more than ten photographs to discuss during their photo-elicitation interviews. There were no parameters set as to how many images they could photograph and all of the participants indicate that they shot more photographs than the ten they elected to share. Information about the collection of photographs accompanies the participants' narratives to provide additional context to the images selected by the women.

### **Overview of the Participants**

**Table 3.1**  
**Demographic Profile of Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Hometown</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Year in College</b>	<b># of Years Completed at Brooks</b>	<b>Career Aspirations</b>	<b>Place of Residence</b>
<b>Brenda</b>	<b>Atlanta, GA</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>Biochemistry &amp; Cellular Biology</b>	<b>Graduating Senior</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>STEM Faculty Member</b>	<b>On-Campus</b>
<b>Reagan</b>	<b>Washington DC</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>Psychology</b>	<b>Graduating Senior</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Midwife</b>	<b>Off-Campus</b>
<b>Rebellion Seeker</b>	<b>Chicago, IL</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Junior</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Uncertain</b>	<b>Off-Campus</b>

## **Understanding Rebellion Seeker**

**Rebellion Seeker:** Identity is such a weird thing too.

**Researcher:** Weird in what way?

**Rebellion Seeker:** In that I guess when people expect you to tell them, “Tell me, what is your identity?” I just think, “Well, which part? Because I know you’re asking for a part of it.” There’s no way I could fully explain to you who I am, not just because I’m a complex individual, as everyone is. I don’t know exactly all of who I am. “Hello, the unconscious—I mean it’s kind of why it’s called the unconscious.” (pause) Not conscious.

**Snapshot of Rebellion Seeker.** Rebellion Seeker is a 19-year-old junior majoring in English. She is the youngest participant in the study as she matriculates at Brooks shortly after her 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. Although she is admitted to several other prestigious universities, she ultimately decides on Brooks because of the generous financial aid package and its geographic location. Her family relocates to the Chicago area prior to her beginning high school and Rebellion Seeker is highly motivated to return to her hometown, where Brooks University is located. She attends a public magnet high school with a math and science emphasis. Some students are admitted via selective enrollment but most are zoned to the school and live in the surrounding area, the second worst neighborhood in Chicago according to Rebellion Seeker. Largely African American with small numbers of Latino students, Rebellion Seeker’s high school demographics represent a stark contrast from the population of Brooks University. Additionally, the demographics differ significantly from the high school she

would have attended if she had attended her zoned high school in her home state as that school is largely comprised of White and Asian students. Because of her outstanding academic record, she is encouraged to go to college by her high school guidance counselors although she still receives messages from these same counselors that her odds of dropping out of college are significant. Many of the latent messages communicated to the women in her high school center on, “You’re a black girl in [this high school], and I’m fairly sure you’re gonna end up pregnant within a year, so I don’t think you’re going to college.”

Rebellion Seeker’s nuclear family includes her mother, grandmother, thirty-year-old cousin, and younger brother, all of whom lived together prior to her arrival at Brooks. Rebellion Seeker’s relationship with her family, especially her mother, is tumultuous. Often disagreeing, Rebellion Seeker’s mother weighs in on various topics relating to Rebellion Seeker’s identity development but is typically challenged by her daughter about these insertions of her beliefs. Her father is deceased but her parents separate prior to his death. Her mother attended college, dropped out after two years and completed her degree online. At the time of the interviews, Rebellion Seeker is an English major but had recently changed her major from Mechanical Engineering as she feels the Engineering curriculum is too limiting.

**Rebellion Seeker’s photographs.** The complexity that personifies Rebellion Seeker, her independent spirit, and her resistance to being categorized is embodied through her words, photographs, even her selection of pseudonym. A few minutes into the first interview, Rebellion Seeker identifies herself as an outlier, introducing those

words into the discussion of her identity. When sharing her photographs during the photo elicitation interview, each of the ten photographs she discusses is of either a landscape or an collection of disparate items, such as a series of eclectic items on a bookshelf. Very nuanced, at first glance many of the photographs appear to be very similar however when looking more closely at them and hearing her interpretation of the images, the intentionality behind each shot becomes evident. Rebellion Seeker chooses to focus on her world outside of the university, taking photos on her way to and from school yet never while on campus attending classes. These photographs suggest that the source of her identity definition as she understands it, is external to the university. Establishing herself as different from her peers, her family's expectations, other women, and other African American Brooks University students, Rebellion Seeker often finds her understanding of herself being challenged by those who attempt to define her more narrowly.

**“Not like everyone else’s kid.”** Some of Rebellion Seeker’s earliest familial messages are that she is not like the rest of her family. According to Rebellion Seeker, “I became the instant outlier because I was not like everybody else’s kid. I was younger than everybody, ahead of everyone, interested in what I was doing, reading books on Asian mythology while kids were running around singing BET videos (laughs).” While she embraces being different, it becomes evident to her as she grows up that her family members hold a negative connotation with being an outlier. Rebellion Seeker’s family recognizes her intellectual aptitude but views her academic aspirations and intellect as a phase that she would be forced to transition out of when she is not successful. Met with

laughter and disbelief when she asserted that she would be attending college, her family comments, “that’s[her interest in attending college] never gonna last, she’ll discover boys, blah, blah, blah, you’ll fail at life, you ain’t gonna be shit.” The belief that Rebellion Seeker’s intellectual curiosity and drive only exists because she is overtly interested in boys is asserted through many of the messages she receives from her mother. The primary caretaker in her family, Rebellion Seeker’s father passes away when she was a young child, leaving her mother as the primary communicator of messages regarding womanhood.

Rebellion Seeker feels that her peers begin trying to define her as early as second grade, with it reaching its peak in middle school once structured cliques begin to emerge. Encompassing more than the standard middle school cliques focused on people’s appearances or interests, Rebellion Seeker indicates that it was during this phase in her life when people outside of her family begin defining her as an outlier. Classified as the “Teacher’s Pet,” her peers often mistake her quiet, introverted demeanor for weakness, assuming that because she is quiet that she does not have anything to say. She is often stereotyped as the “quiet, shy girl that’s gonna let you step all over her,” an image which she found to be very contradictory to her own perception of self.

During the photo journaling process, Rebellion Seeker takes a photograph of a container which holds a hodgepodge of seemingly disparate items, including some paintbrushes, a hair pick, a hammer, a brightly colored fake flower, a pair of sunglasses, a marker, a sewing tape measure, and her toothbrush. Although she has many thoughts

of what the photograph represents in her life, as it relates to the perception of her as someone who is quiet or in the background she expresses the following:

That flower is great (laughs). I mean the flash of color is a lot like me...even though I can see myself I guess in the social eye, or seeing myself I mean outside of my own head I suppose, as kind of fade-away wallflower-ish, I guess. I'm quiet, I don't bother anybody. But at the same time, if I decided to open my mouth, there would be a burst of color, like "Whoa, what just happened? Hold up. I didn't expect that!" I bet you didn't! It happens all the time. And I know that's a part of myself—not because I want to shock people, but I don't talk unless I have something to say, or unless you ask me to say something, in which you probably did want me to say it.

Rebellion Seeker's voice highlights the idea that she is in control of the sides of her self that she shares with those around her. While others may see her as different, an outlier, or even invisible, her understanding of herself and its portrayal is much more complex, diverse, and intentional.

Rebellion Seeker experiences feeling like she is an outlier in many facets of her life. She feels distinct from other women on campus because she has a more curvaceous body type that she perceives as being taller and heavier than many of her peers. An avid writer, Rebellion Seeker shares the personal journal entries that she writes while in the process of photo-journaling. In addition to providing important insight into her methodology for choosing and taking photos, she also reveals her thoughts and feelings

about aspects of her identity development, including her feelings about her body and her appearance:

I talked to Shawna today and it was amazing that it wasn't just me having issues with being the extreme outlier on campus. Not just in the color of the campus aesthetic but the size too, it's awkward being a size 16 surrounded by a bunch of fours. I'd been fairly conscious of it in highschool, but I also didn't really give a damn. It's really awkward now that I'm out of that haze of "fuck the world" and into trying to see what it's about.

Rebellion Seeker's words illustrate the role that the collegiate environment has on her identity development. In this example, the setting reinforces that she is different in terms of her race, and appearance. The reconciliation of her physical appearance and how that translates into what is considered to be feminine surfaces as a theme not only while at Brooks University but also in her pre-college experiences.

**"Act more like a girl."** Rebellion Seeker consistently receives messages that she is not feminine enough. Told by her mother that she needs to "act more like a girl," Rebellion Seeker's mother equates femaleness with femininity and emphasizes that dating boys, wearing dresses and accessories, and maintaining an acceptable weight are very important. All of these suggestions are attempts by her mother to feminize Rebellion Seeker and create an image of Rebellion Seeker that is consistent with her own definition of what it means to be a woman.

**Interviewer:** If she [your mother] could've painted perfect Rebellion Seeker, what would that child have looked like?



**Rebellion Seeker:** So I think she would've definitely liked it if I'd stayed in that vein of being feminine, you know, wearing skirts or liking to wear skirts. So she would've definitely liked it if I'd maintained my level of smartness and continued busting heads and making As and doing all that other wonderful jank that she likes to push aside sometimes, and continued on that "Oh, she's such a nice feminine girl, and she wears skirts all the time...and she's really social and nice and whatever."

As evidenced by Rebellion Seeker's own words, had she displayed more conventionally feminine characteristics and interests, it would justify or substantiate her intellectual drive in the eyes of her mother. Just being smart is insufficient if it means that Rebellion Seeker is not perceived as being traditionally feminine. Her mother's definition of femininity focuses on her appearance and that definition is incongruent with Rebellion Seeker's personal definition of womanhood which is largely biological.

**Interviewer:** How would you, in your own definition, describe what it means to you to be a woman? And I'm intentionally not using 'female' or 'femininity' because I feel like that's kind of the term that you're associating with how your mom views things.

**Rebellion Seeker:** Femininity to her is definitely centered on what I look like. And I personally never took that role—I was like, "I'm a girl, biologically I'm a girl. I'm sorry, but I can't change that, that's not gonna change no matter what I wear. I mean I suppose I could change it, but I don't want to—I kinda like being a girl." So I never had that definition. I guess I never adopted that definition of it.

Rebellion Seeker's mother questions her daughter's sexuality as well because of her appearance, despite Rebellion Seeker's assertions that she is heterosexual.

Rebellion Seeker also received the "act like a girl" message from administrators at her school. Mistaken for a boy by her high school's Dean of Students, his comments on her clothing send a clear message about gender, femininity, achievement and perception:

And he was like, "Why are you dressed like a C student? You look like a degenerate." These two girls came in like wearing super-short skirts and heels to high school. "Ok, why can't you dress more like them?" Because I'm not them. I wanted to say, "Because I'm not a ho!" (laughs), but I felt like that would be taking it too far. Like "Why can't you dress more like them? You should dress more like your reputation." And I was like, you don't know my reputation. No one knows my reputation. I am the most unknown infamous person in this school.

The Dean of Students knows of Rebellion Seeker because of her reputation. Her academic and co-curricular accolades are well known throughout her school. He does not however know what she looks like and when he meets her, he perceives there to be a disconnection between her academic accomplishments and her appearance. Rebellion Seeker's response to this and feelings of being "the most unknown infamous person" speaks to the sense of being visibly invisible, a phenomena which also occurs at Brooks University.

**“I am my own person.”** Rebellion Seeker’s family is religious, especially her grandmother, and Rebellion Seeker details numerous stories of her mother dragging her to church or questioning her lack of belief. Rebellion Seeker challenges her mother’s perspectives about faith and religion, and finds herself in contentious situations with her mother when she criticizes her religious views. Rebellion Seeker indicates that her questioning of the value of church and her reticence to attend regularly are one of the reoccurring conflicts between her and her mother. Her inability to connect with her mother’s faith is an extension of Rebellion Seeker’s fiercely independent and highly logical way of looking at things:

She always asked me ”Where do you think we came from?” And it’s like I don’t have any thoughts on it, but I don’t think that anything with that many contradictions in it is something I should listen to. I’m a logical creature. Not to say that I disregard your faith—“Believe in it, but I’m not going to.” It’s a matter of personal opinion.

She perceives that her mother tries to force her religious views on her, pressuring Rebellion Seeker to believe as she believes, which further results in Rebellion Seeker distancing herself from her mother’s belief system. Rebellion Seeker wants her mother to understand that she needs to find her own “spiritual pathway, if there even was one,” indicating that “It’s my choice, and I need you [her mother] to understand that I am not an extension of you (laughs)—I am my own person. As much as you hate to admit it, I am my own person.”

Although Rebellion Seeker describes herself as not being a part of “what most people would define as black culture,” when she arrives at Brooks she finds herself being considered a member of the African American community regardless of whether she holds similar interests or viewpoints. When she begins looking for a singing group to join on campus, she is encouraged to join the campus’ gospel choir despite the fact that she expresses disinterest in performing gospel music both for musical and ideological reasons. Her peers comment, “Oh, you can sing, and you’re black, you should come.” Rebellion Seeker responds, “No, I don’t want to sing. I don’t go to church...I can’t stand church, it’s boring.” Rebellion Seeker’s firmly asserts that her interests and values are inconsistent with those of the gospel choir but still has to navigate others’ expectations that she would join the organization simply because she fits its demographics. In this situation, Rebellion Seeker reaffirms what it means to her to be African American and spiritual (or not) and does so by remaining true to her self definition, even when facing pressure from peers to conform.

Rebellion Seeker, one of the participants who was living off campus at the time of the interviews also feels pressure to confirm to the expectations of her peers in her residential college, commenting:

The idea is your college is like your family...and the clique of the college itself, I mean we don’t have sororities but the residential college system is as close as it gets, and in some cases worse....I remember someone was like, “You’re betraying your college by not doing something or other.” It was like going to a Powderpuff game or something.

While she understands its purpose to be that of a “safety net” which provides students with support and community, she is resistant to the idea that “this (your residential college) is all that you’re supposed to be comfortable in,” as she feels that is limiting. She also feels that her non-African American peers do not see the diversity within the African American community and instead homogenize the entire group, believing in a very narrow depiction of African American culture and what it means to be Black. She asserts that her non Black peers latch on to images of popular cultural icons such as Lil’ Wayne and “accepted that version of Blackness as actual Blackness, rather than like the 5% of Black people in America.” She recounts her experiences with being lumped into this general idea of what it means to be Black:

So as a Black person on Brooks campus...when you are kind of lumped into that, and then you are completely divergent from that—like when people ask you questions, and they expect Ebonics, and you speak in perfect English. Oh yeah (sighs). The expressions on people’s faces. “Oh, what’s your name?” (participant says her name) “What?” You heard me (laughs)—my middle name is (participant says her middle name) with an accent on the end—What do you want from me? I mean when people expect Laquanda, I mean and there are Laquandas named Laquanda on campus or whatever. And even still, they don’t act in that way. I mean we are at Brooks. I can’t believe you can’t make the connection that even though I’m black, I am at Brooks, which means I have a modicum amount of intelligence.

She receives pushback from both African American and White students at Brooks because of her interests in Asian culture. Both groups question her interest in a culture outside of her own, with her African American peer group insisting “Oh Wow. You must be an outlier! That’s not black culture!” Rebellion Seeker resists this narrow definition by her peers countering that her interest, “It is a sense of culture, of *intelligence*, which I personally think is a part of black culture. I mean what do you mean by “It’s not black culture?” Are you trying to say that I should speak in Ebonics?” Triggered by the idea that intelligence and African American culture are somehow incompatible, sentiments such as these further a sense of impending separation between Rebellion Seeker and many members of Brooks’ African American community.

**“Free to fly.”** Rebellion Seeker receives many different messages about college from her high school counselors and teachers, but all of them emphasize the idea that college is about freedom and learning. Given her often adversarial relationship with her mother, Rebellion Seeker also thinks that college affords her the opportunity to be free from her parent’s attempts to influence her. She shares a story that occurs after she unpacks her room at her residential college in which the reality of her separation from her mother and their subsequent divergent reactions are illustrated:

And I remember her saying, “Do you need anything else?” But it wasn’t like, “Do you need anything else? Did we forget something in the car?” that kind of thing. It was “Do you need anything else,” like “Say yes because I know you need me.” (emphasis) I was like (laughs), “No, I don’t need anything—my stuff is here—yay!” She left and I remember when she left, I was like, “Holy crap!

She's gone!" She's gone. It was such a relief...Leaving with her went a lot of the stress of my high school career, and a lot of the stress of just being in Chicago and the craziness of being in that house (laughs).

The transition to college represents true freedom for Rebellion Seeker and she indicates that when she first arrives at Brooks, she is so focused on her freedom and the idea that she was "free to fly," she is not initially as aware of her surroundings or even her response to her new environment. To Rebellion Seeker, Brooks represents the opportunity to be with other high-achieving students who share similar interests to her own. Because Brooks is known for its liberal environment, filled with students who also share her experience of feeling as if they are an outlier, Rebellion Seeker expects that she will feel more a part of the fabric of the institution than she has in previous settings. This focus on freedom extends the honeymoon period for Rebellion Seeker and she is delayed in her initial engagement with Brooks.

During the photo-elicitation interview, Rebellion Seeker photographs a picture of the sunset taken during her bus ride home from class. When asked her motivations for capturing this image, she indicates that she is drawn to the contrast in the photo and what she describes as the tension between light and dark. The picture represents how she sees her undergraduate experience, with the light symbolizing the freedom and excitement she feels when she first arrives on campus, and the darkness representing the end of her undergraduate career. While she still views herself as an outlier, she asserts that this is now more of a conscious choice on her part rather than a status imposed upon her by others. She believes that the light in the photo also represents all of the positive

experiences awaiting her after graduation. This light is “waiting for her on the other side” as the prize for her persistence through the challenges she has experienced during her time at Brooks. This photograph and her discussion of its meaning communicates a sense of optimism and hopefulness similar to when she discusses feeling finally free to be herself after being dropped off at college.

**“We’s not there, but we do live there.”** The small numbers of African American women on Brooks’ campus can also lead to their peers confusing one African American student for another. When Rebellion Seeker arrives on campus, she anticipates that she might be confused with another African American female student. She discusses this possibility with a sense of inevitability and as something that would happen as a result of her being in a new environment with peers who might not have had extensive prior interactions with other African American students. However, when it occurs during her first semester and Rebellion Seeker is confused for another African American freshman, it is still a source of frustration for her. This is evidenced by the passion and incredulity with which she retells the story, even two years after it initially occurs. In her freshman year, there were only four total African American new students in her residential college, two men and two women. Rebellion Seeker and the woman that she is often mistaken for look different and have very different personalities. Rebellion Seeker’s “doppelganger” was more socially engaged in their residential college’s party scene while Rebellion Seeker herself was not.



Rebellion Seeker comments:

Raba (pseudonym) and I weren't even a part of the same circles of people. And I hate to say circles of people because it sounds really cliquish, but literally it was the same circles of people. She hung out with most of the freshmen that drank—I did not. If she was at a party, I may or may not have been. I just depended on if I felt like going to dance—bam. But there was a sense of...if one of you was doing it, why aren't you?

Not only was she consistently confused with someone else, but eventually this devolves to the point where Rebellion Seeker and her roommate are not even acknowledged as members of her room's suite. Peers comment that they thought there were only four members in a C suite typically reserved for six people. According to Rebellion Seeker, her and her roommate—a biracial, African American and Chinese student, were the “silent C members, the missing C members, the cannot-find-you C members—we's not there, but we do live there.” Rebellion Seeker was visible enough to be confused with another peer of the same ethnicity, but not distinctive enough in the mind of her peers to be remembered.

**“Do something revolutionary.”** “Change something. Do something revolutionary. Do something that will rock up a few people's world, like say that your name is Rebellion Seeker in like a perfect British accent.”

Towards the end of her photo-elicitation interview, Rebellion's Seeker shares a photograph that is mostly cloudy sky and on the day that she takes it, a rainstorm was eminent. Although it ultimately does not end up raining on that day, her motivation for

taking the picture is the anticipated storm. She expresses that she likes storms and feels that they are symbolic in her life and representative of her “fairly turbulent personality.” Rebellion Seeker indicates that although her personality is at times turbulent, she would “Like to think that even with all my issues (laughs), there’s still something about me that I could create a storm, and not in that totally destructing way, but in a revolutionary kind of way.”

For Rebellion Seeker, being revolutionary in thought requires surrendering to the moment and understanding that not everything can be planned or controlled. She shares an image during her photo-elicitation interview which embraces this idea. The photograph is taken in a neighborhood and contains images of a few cars, a post office truck, and some homes. The street is curving off into the distance and the image is full of light as it was taken in the early morning. The focal point of the picture for Rebellion Seeker is the road and its curvature, which she photographs to represent this idea that she cannot always see the end of the road. Reconciled to the idea that chaos and uncertainty are a part of life, Rebellion Seeker believes that having a plan is a “nice security blanket,” but that being able to adapt is even more critical given the ephemeral nature of planning. Rather than trying to control and manage the changes that life throws at her, Rebellion Seeker embraces this idea of making decisions in the moment rather than trying to anticipate them. Her philosophy is the following:

And I’ve always done this even if I’ve always had a plan, I’ve always had that kind of mentality that I’ll make my decision when I get there. I’ll have plans, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to follow through with any of them if the

circumstances aren't right. Because what's the point of following a plan if the circumstances aren't right for the plan? That's just silly—that's like turning left at a turn-right-only sign!(laughs)

**“All of that is what I am.”** Belief in social constructs is hard with the millions of compartments, but you believe...it is that belief that is fatal...the belief in the hope that one day the compartments don't have to conflict, it doesn't have to be simple obligatory commitment, but an ease of being without that conflict...wouldn't that be nice? (notes from Rebellion Seeker's personal journal)

The final photograph that Rebellion Seeker shares is that of a tall office building located adjacent to Brooks University. In the photograph, a large tree obscures part of the building. Not a planned shot but captured as Rebellion Seeker walks to campus, she takes it on impulse because of its representation of something “human-made” superimposed over something “supernatural.” She believes that “identity is something created though the midsection where the tree meets the building, as it were, where construct, like a social construct, meets something that's already kind of just there.” Rebellion Seeker continues by sharing how she feels forced at times to compartmentalize her identity for others, but while recognizing that fragmented is not how she understands herself to be:

Identity is such a weird thing too. In that I guess when people expect you to tell them, “What is your identity?” I just think, well, “Which part, because I know you're asking for a part of it.” There's no way I could fully explain to you who I

am, not just because I'm a complex individual, as everyone is—I don't know exactly all of who I am.

It's like the idea of constructing in certain versions of identity I guess for identification sake. Sure, maybe it's easier if you can always tell that I'm a girl or a guy because some psychic trauma is going to happen to you if you can't tell, or it's ambiguous, or you thought it was one thing, and then you found out I'm something else. Deal with it—it's called change. It's called difference. It's called assumptions and reality. I know you don't like the word reality because it's real, but you know, sorry. I don't fit into...I can't fit into the constructs.

As referenced earlier, Rebellion Seeker used another photograph, best described as a mash-up of divergent items ranging from a hammer to a toothbrush, to again illustrate this perception of external fragmentation. She indicates that this photograph is was an example of how her brain works, never separating out her academic interests of English from Mechanical Engineering but rather viewing everything as a sophisticated, intertwined matrix of understanding. She continues, sharing that all of the items together are essential to each other and highlights the following:

“It was all a part of who I am, who I was, and it still is. Having it all together is pretty much not just the way I think, but I guess the way I see myself as like...you know, people are “Well what are you first?” I'm like this and all of that is what I am—all of that is me—I'm sorry that I can't separate that out for you, but to separate it out would be to do a disjustice to myself. And I'm sorry I can't do that—I've done that long enough—no thanks.

Although she is referring to the items in the photo, her commentary also speaks to identity construction and the inherently intersectional nature of identity. Although Rebellion Seeker has often been asked to define herself in terms of compartmentalized identities, she has always resisted that. Her selection of this image and her discussion of how she makes meaning of it illustrates that she is no longer willing to see herself through a fragmented lens. While others might perceive these interests or components of her identity as disparate, it is clear that she has an understanding of them as intertwined, intersectional, and inextricably connected.

### **Understanding Brenda**

“And for me, the biggest thing I can do is first of all, being who I am, and not altering that in different contexts.”

**Snapshot of Brenda.** Brenda is a Biochemistry and Cellular Biology major from Atlanta, Georgia. She is 21 years old and is a graduating senior. Each summer of high school, Brenda would participate in an intensive science summer program and while attending one at an academically selective university in the Northeast, she learns about Brooks University during a college fair. She admits that she did not consider herself to be a candidate for college until her junior year in high school, but after attending the summer program she gained a greater understanding of college's importance. This exposure to an elite institution is also central in motivating her to apply to academically selective institutions. Prior to her senior year in high school, Brenda's current high school loses its accreditation and that spurs her family to relocate to a different school district. Her original high school held a Title I school designation and was

predominately African American whereas her new high school is predominately White and considered among the best public schools in the state. Significantly more academically rigorous than her initial high school, it is here that Brenda first experiences being the only African American female in her Advanced Placement classes and the stresses associated with both the increased academic demands and the racial isolation.

Brenda's family consists of a strong nucleus of educated women, led by her mother. Brenda's parents were married for more than twenty years but divorced due to her father's drug addiction. She does not currently have a relationship with him and receives much of her emotional support from her mother and her two older sisters, one of whom has a six-year-old son. Brenda's oldest sister is pursuing a doctoral degree out of the state while her other sister is attending college in addition to caring for her young child. Brenda's mother holds a degree from a historically African American college in her home state and works in a professional position in a corporate setting. Brenda's journey has been influenced by key figures in her life.

Prior to her arrival at Brooks University, her mother and sisters are central in helping Brenda understand who she is. While at Brooks, her peer group and faculty mentors encourage her to ownership of her identity and embrace its complexities. Although Brenda does not speak explicitly of "shifting" (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003), she does believe that in order to reach her professional goals, she may be expected to mute or mask elements of her identity, particularly those associated with her race. Extremely goal oriented, in the process of learning more about Brenda, it becomes

clear that Brooks University represents a conduit for her, one which assists her in bettering herself personally and intellectually.

**Brenda's photographs.** The most connected of all three participants to her residential college, her photographs reveal Brooks' importance in her life, as eight of the ten photographs she shares are taken in her residential college. Within her collection of pictures, Brenda focuses on images of items on her desk and the view of life outside of her bedroom window. Other images include locations she values in her residential college. With Brenda's photographs, it is important to note the vantage point she takes the pictures from. While a few of her photographs are taken at eye-level, if she is able to take the picture from a higher viewpoint in which she can aim the camera down at her target image, she does so. In addition to the photographs taken of her desk, there is only one external photograph which appears to have been taken at eye-level and that is the image of the walkway she travels from her residential college to her classes. When examining that photograph, it is clear that she takes it as she experiences it each day rather than from the birds-eye view which is endemic to some of her other images. All of the images with the exception of the walkway feel as though she takes them from the perspective of a spectator. Although the items photographed are personal, the perspective seems detached. The image of the walkway, which she later discusses at length in her interview, feels more personal and intimate than the others perhaps reflecting its personal connection to her life.

**"Being a Davis woman."** In order to understanding how Brenda makes meaning of her own identity and its development, it is important to discuss her family. The close-

knit relationship that she has with her mother and two older sisters is formative in shaping her identity prior to her arrival at Brooks. Referring to themselves as the Davis (pseudonym) Women, Brenda's mother is clear in her messaging that their family of women is a community and serve as each other's primary network of support. When handling life's challenges, Brenda's mother advises her, "It's okay to be weak, but...you need to man up...you can cry for a little bit, but you need to man up and get it together." Brenda's parents divorce when she was eight due to her father's drug addiction but she posits the separation and being raised only by her mother in a positive light:

In some ways, I actually liked being raised by just my mother. I'm very fortunate (laughs) that my dad is no longer in the picture, because I feel like with that, I saw my mom go a lot. And just the journey that it has been, she was kind of forced to put us in positions of responsibility that we just kinda had to be in.

We just had to learn how to cook. We had to learn how to learn how to take care of each other—not that my mom was a negligent person—she just kinda had to force us into some roles that my dad used to fill, that we had to learn how to fill. So we had a lot of freedom. We're now women.

Though her mother's parenting style and the example she sets, Brenda learns what it means to be a woman. According to Brenda, Davis women are strong, hard working, connected to each other, and supportive of each other. Messages of the importance of family, independence, resilience, and being true to yourself are were all featured messages in her household. Brenda's internalization of these messages serves as an



important foundation to her identity development especially once she arrives at Brooks University.

Although the importance of hard work is a central theme in her home growing up, Brenda's mother emphasizes that the goal is for her to get to college and that "if you got there, you'd made it." While her family is supportive of her going to college, as all of them are either in college or have attained degrees when Brenda applies to Brooks, her family does not fully understand what it means for Brenda to get accepted, enroll, and graduate from a highly selective institution. Because of her involvement in summer programs hosted by elite institutions looking to expose diverse, high-achieving students to their universities, Brenda began to seriously consider attending college at one of these hyper competitive schools. Once she puts herself on this track, she realizes that her college pursuits differ not only from her peers, but from her family as well. While it does not distance Brenda from her nuclear family, her experiences at Brooks and her long-term goal to be a university professor, are at times unrelatable to her family members. Brenda comments:

I didn't even realize until I went to MIT (for a summer program) that there's a clear distinction between like any university and a good university. I try not to draw lines between schools, but there is in society. There's this big division of like, you know of the idea that some schools are not good enough. Like if you really wanna go somewhere to make an impact, you should go to blah, blah, blah school. And I didn't realize that, and my family never taught me that. So I don't

think for my family, difficulty in thriving once accepted into college was a thought for them. It was just college.

While she always knew she had her family's support, college marked a time in Brenda's life in which she had to establish her own networks, find mentors, and redefine success on her own terms.

**“What do I believe?”** Because of issues with accreditation, Brenda switches high schools, moving from a lower performing, predominately African American high school to one that is more affluent, academically competitive, and has a significantly smaller African American population. When asked about her relationships with her peers, Brenda largely references only her experiences at her first high school. It was there that she places an emphasis on cultivating her social life. Considered popular in her peer group, Brenda is reticent to discuss her academic aspirations with her friends, especially her love for science. She says, “I was into science, but I thought it was kind of wack because I was really popular in my previous school (laughs). And people know I made good grades, but they didn't know how much of a geek I really was—I played that down a lot.” In her second high school, Brenda does not invest in establishing meaningful relationships with her peers and the increased rigor of the curriculum requires her to focus more intently on her academics. She places less emphasis on the social aspects of school, concentrating her energies into academics and achieving her goal of admission into an academically elite institution.

When she arrives at Brooks, Brenda feels pressure from her peers to only associate with those aspects of campus life which center on the African American

experience, such as attending parties thrown by African American students or getting involved in the Black Student Association. Because some older African American students at Brooks do not enjoy their residential college experience and subsequently move off campus after their freshman year, Brenda feels pressure to not connect with her residential college and its many traditions. When she arrives on campus, she expresses “she just wanted to be my old self and not be challenged by my new social setting,” and as a result she defaults to associating with only other African American students and participating in mostly racially homogenous activities. She indicates however that eventually, “something clicked” and she makes the conscious decision to expand her circle of friends. While diverse, her closest friends are no longer the homogenous peer group that she had in high school or when she initially entered Brooks. Although she still very strongly connects with her African American heritage, it is clear that the relationships she has with other African American students is her choice and not something that has occurred by default because they happen to be the same race. Brenda is emphatic when sharing the following:

I’m pro-black until the day I die. I want y’all to know (laughs). But I don’t feel like I have to constantly identify with my blackness because it’s not only part of my physical identity, but also an integral part of my upbringing. I feel like my freshman and sophomore year, I was trying to identify more with being black, but I’ve been black.

Brenda’s expansion of her friendship circle coincides with her desire to explore other aspects of her identity—those aspects which were either muted due to the primacy of

race in her life or simply previously unrealized. These experiences broaden Brenda's understanding of self, expanding it and challenging her to consider her identity differently. Brenda corroborates this idea, sharing:

Brooks has definitely challenged my racial identity. And what I mean by challenge, I mean it's made me ask myself, "What does it mean to be a black woman at Brooks University coming from my upbringing in Atlanta?" I like being challenged though, because if you're challenging somebody, you're like forcing me to question, "What do I believe, and why do I want to do it? What do I want to do about it? What role do I want to play in it?"

In addition to cultivating a greater understanding of her belief system, Brenda is also developing a more sophisticated understanding of her identity. As demonstrated through her own words, Brenda connects race, gender, and class with her value system, dismantling how her identity and her values intersect. She has the opportunity to explore these intersections through her involvement in her residential college. The most integrated of all three participants into her community, Brenda did not always feel a strong connection with her college, in part because of the influence of others.

Although she describes her connection with her residential college as a process, Brenda cites the relationships she develops there as a source of strength and support for her throughout her tenure at Brooks:

So at first I didn't hate (my college), but I thought a lot of the traditions it had were stupid. There's a lot of very different traditions at Brooks that were in place. You just have to accept them when you come to Brooks. I just have a

problem...just accepting things blindly. I like to know, “Why we are doing this? Why should I have to do it?”(laughs) And I felt like at Brooks, I didn’t really have that choice at first socially.

Many of the photos that Brenda shares during the photo-elicitation interview are locations in her residential college. One of her photographs is taken from the window of her room overlooking a grassy area in her college where students regularly convene to socialize. When asked her motivation for capturing this image, Brenda indicates that it encapsulates the sense of community she associates with her residential college. She expresses that while two of her closest friends, who are also African American, hate their residential college experience, feel as if the culture is alienating, and believe that they are “just seen as like the token black kid, and not for like who they were,” she has a very different experience at her college. Brenda speaks candidly when she says, “I feel like my residential college accepted me when I didn’t really like it. They accepted me with I started to like it. They have so many different choices to choose from, so many different interests...that you don’t have to do everything.” This unconditional support, acceptance, and understanding of Brenda as a unique individual cements her relationship and connection with her residential college.

**“Well, this is Brooks.”** College also represents a new, stressful environment in which the women need to establish support networks, navigate an extremely challenging academic setting, and manage others’ responses to aspects of their identity such as race or gender. At times, even elements of their identities which they perceive as fixed, such as their high-achieving identity, are challenged both by their peers as well as by

themselves. For Brenda, Brooks activates feelings of self-doubt. The rigorous academic expectations and the perception of Brooks as an elite institution caused her to at times, question her intellectual ability. Brenda remarks:

I think Brooks is a great institution. I just hate how people always are like, “Well this is Brooks,” and they always like put it on this pedestal. Then it makes you feel like, maybe I don’t deserve to be here. I mean now, I try to feel like I deserve to be here, but I feel like I had to work to a point where I proved my intellectual merit—that I deserved to be here.”

In an academic environment as stressful and rigorous as Brooks, developing mechanisms to cope with the stress is imperative to a student’s retention. Brenda manages the stress of being in college by establishing close relationships with faculty members who provide her with additional academic support and an emotional outlet for venting. They are important in her retention because their presence as African Americans or women in STEM disciplines on a predominately White campus or in a largely male environment, reinforce for her that she can achieve her goals and be successful in similar environments. Prior to meeting one of her mentors, Brenda never shares her grade point average with anyone because she believes it to be significantly lower than her peers. The shame she feels about her GPA leads her to withhold this information, even though doing so and seeking assistance could assist her in improving her grades. During her first informal meeting with one of her mentors, she reveals this information to him and finds herself surprised and empowered by his willingness to help her. She reveals that he was, “the first faculty member to ever reach out and want to

help me, like advocate for me.” As this relationship evolves, it serves as a consistent source of support and guidance for Brenda during her tenure at Brooks. Brenda indicates that these mentoring relationships are essential in helping her navigate through the university. Although prior to coming to college, no one had every told her how important it is to establish a support network such as this, she learns that having someone believe in and advocate for her is invaluable and integral to her emotional and academic success..

**“Just have my life in order.”** Growing up, Brenda is raised Christian and attends church prior to her parents’ divorce which occurs when she was in elementary school. The end of her parents’ marriage, coupled with her older sister’s pregnancy outside of marriage, creates an environment in which her family feels judged by members of their church. This ultimately results in the family’s estrangement from organized religion. In spite of this, Brenda still feels as though spirituality is a central part of her upbringing with her mother’s faith and belief system serving as a framework for Brenda’s spiritual understanding. According to Brenda:

My mom is really big on talking about God. She knows the bible very well.

She’s really big on just like having her faith in God. She’s not really big on like the community aspect of church. I think once she divorced my dad and they[the church] kind of turned their shoulder, and then my sister got pregnant. So as far as faith, it is big, but my mom really never taught me, “You should be involved in church this and that, especially as I became a young woman.

Brenda and the messages she receives from her mother indicate a clear distinction between faith and having a sense of spiritual grounding versus going to church. While her mother positions faith as important throughout her childhood, Brenda's relationship with spirituality is complicated. As she references in a later interview, her faith and her belief in something greater than herself is key to her identity construction and provides an important coping mechanism which enables her to persist in Brooks' rigorous and stressful academic environment.

Prayer is also an important self-preservation tool as Brenda believes that her active prayer life allows her to maintain her sanity at Brooks:

I've come to the conclusion that it's like...Brooks demands more of me than I humanly possible can do – let's just say that. So in order for me to cope and not be crazy, and just like I guess keep up with my faith, it would be to pray. I see too many people at Brooks that crack – I know too many people that have like literally become mentally unstable. I recently know a freshman that just got discharged for like not being able to deal with pressure. And I just know so many people, and for me like that will not be me. I won't let it, so yeah, my faith, prayer just definitely keeps me grounded.

This connection between prayer and remaining mentally healthy is central for Brenda and is reflected in her photographs as well as discussed extensively during her photo-elicitation interview. She shares a second photograph that is taken from the vantage point of her bedroom window. The image includes Brooks' intramural fields and the land surrounding it. When asked why she elects to take this photograph, Brenda



responds that the ability to look out of the window, see and hear other people, even watch planes as they head towards a nearby airport, all allow her to remain perspective. The image represents and reminds her that there is life outside of Brooks, “a world outside our eyes” and that her current state of ambiguity and stress is temporary. The fear of having a mental or emotional breakdown due to the pressure at Brooks is very salient for her, thus making coping mechanisms such as these that much more important.

Another coping mechanism for Brenda is maintaining a high level of organization. Many of the photographs she captures are demonstrative of her extreme need for organization, including the keeping of numerous schedules, planners, and calendars documenting her every move from taking tests, to meeting graduate school application deadlines, to even doing laundry. She indicates that these are additional tools she uses to keep herself grounded, focused, and most importantly—peaceful:

I just know that peace is really important. You being able to have your ground in what’s going on and how to tackle it is really important. It’s something money can’t buy me. Even if I keep pursuing my career, they were to fire me, or anything would’ve happened, like health decline, I just wanna make sure I am in order, just have my life in order.

**Managing “humble beginnings.”** Brooks University, like many academically selective institutions, has affluent students among its student body. Brenda does not grow up in an wealthy household. Although her mother is college educated, Brenda grows up in what she defines as “humble beginnings.” She discusses working at the Georgia Dome from the time she is twelve until age sixteen to earn additional money to

support the household. Having had to move just to graduate from an accredited high school, Brenda has faced much uncertainty prior to her matriculation at Brooks.

Throughout her four years, her awareness of both her peers' privilege and the privilege she attains simply by attending a university the caliber of Brooks, is forefront in her mind. She explains:

As a Brooks student, we are offered opportunities that other universities do not have. Just by attending Brooks, we have some social upward mobility. And I'm just really trying to grasp that concept because I've always been underprivileged most of my life (laughs), and I just don't know how to grasp this idea of actually becoming privileged when I leave Brooks. I will be more privileged than people I went to high school [the accredited school] with and that is blowing my mind.

For Brenda, much of why she feels divergent from her peers is because of perceived differences in their socioeconomic status and upbringing. She recognizes that many of her close friends have the financial means to do things that she is unable to do, but acknowledges that being at Brooks affords her access to resources and opportunities that she would not have otherwise have. She recalls a disagreement she has with a friend in which they argue about success and Brenda comments that it was not surprising that the individual is successful because he is wealthy. Brenda believes that as a wealthy person, he has "accessibility and resources that others don't have." Despite feeling different from her Brooks peer group, Brenda also recognizes that she is also very different from her peers back home. Although the discrepancies between her life

experiences and those of her peers at Brooks make her even more aware of the socioeconomic disparities, she still feels a part of this community.

Brenda's struggles with authenticity stem from her strong desire to never lose or alter those aspects of her identity that she believes are essential to her definition of self. With aspirations to be a faculty member in the evolutionary sciences, Brenda anticipates that there will be moments in which achieving her professional goals could necessitate that she adapt in ways which mute the components of her identity which she really values, such as her race or gender.

The biggest thing I can do is first of all, be who I am, and not alter that in different contexts. I hate to say the word 'assimilate', but just like not letting my blackness be down played in front of White audiences. I don't want to let my interest in science or my role as being a student at Brooks, be a greater identifier than me being black. I want to make sure that I don't ignore or belittle my racial identity because it's been a huge part of shaping who I am, my drive, and why certain accomplishments mean so much.

She found support in a faculty member who had also had "humble beginnings" and his mentorship plays an important role in helping Brenda navigate her feelings around her recently acquired privilege. Through connecting with this faculty member, Brenda confirms that she can achieve her goals and still remain true to herself.

Giving back to the Brooks community resonates with Brenda as well. Seen as a way to payback all of the mentoring and support she receives from African American faculty members, Brenda develops mentoring relationships with many of the African

American first year STEM majors in her residential college. Before she discovers her own support network on campus, Brenda is reticent to discuss her academic troubles with faculty members or her peers for fear of appearing unprepared for the rigors of Brooks. In order to demystify the academic experience and provide that support for others, Brenda connects with these first year students and creates a space in which they can share their “successes and struggles.”

### **Understanding Reagan**

“I care too much what people think about me, and so that’s really having me hold back a lot of things. And it’s like a lot of times, it’s just like in my friend group where I’m just like, I feel like I can’t be what I wanna be or who I wanna be.”

**Snapshot of Reagan.** Reagan is a 21-year-old graduating senior who is majoring in Psychology. Originally from Washington D.C., she applies to Brooks through Questbridge, a scholarship program for high-achieving, low-income students which matches them with academically selective institutions. Reagan lives much of her early formative years in Section 8 housing and describes her socioeconomic status as “poor but not destitute.” Her familial structure includes her mother, grandmother, brother and stepfather. Education is emphasized in her home, especially by her mother, who does not have a college education but is determined for her daughter to have one.

Because of the premium her mother places on education, Reagan soon transitions from an underperforming public neighborhood elementary school, to a KIPP charter middle school, ultimately to a private, highly academically selective high school, attended by the children of D.C.’s governmental and professional elite. Her high school

marks a change not only in demographics as she shifts from an ethnically homogenous environment to one in which she is the ethnic minority, but Reagan is now in an environment in which there are significant socioeconomic differences between her and her peers. Reagan feels as though her high school and its demographics helps prepare her for the transition to Brooks University, indicating that she "...kinda took what I learned in [high school], how to be myself, but not be intimidating, and brought that here."

**Reagan's photographs.** Reagan shares eight photos during the photo-elicitation interview and captures a wide variety of types of images. Extremely diverse, Reagan is the only participant to include people in her photographs. Although a parameter of the study is that people cannot be included in the photograph if clearly identifiable, she works around that by using herself as a subject, capturing parts of people such as their feet or hands, and by blurring the image. Out of her eight pictures, she is in three of them, a marked distinction from the other participants who do not incorporate their actual image into any of this shots. Only one of her photographs is of scenery and although the majority of her photographs are taken off campus, she does elect to use two images taken on campus, one of the signage marking the entrance to the institution and the other of the university mascot, both iconic Brooks images.

**"The golden child."** Figuring out who she wants to be independent of the influences of others characterizes Reagan's identity development both at Brooks University and prior to her arrival on campus. While establishing independence is a developmental stage for many college students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), defining

herself outside of the perceptions of others, especially those that she cares about, is a critical part of her growth and development journey.

Some of Reagan's earliest messages about her identity and what she should be doing with her life come from her family. Although a positive attribute to be identified as very intelligent, Reagan admits to feeling as though her family expects her to be the "smart one." As a result, this aspect of her identity develops at least in part out of familial perception and their expectations of her. Reagan explains, "I feel like I was always looked at as the smart one, so I took on that identity. I felt I had to make good grades, and I had to be the smart one, cause that's how I was perceived." Reagan indicates that while growing up, she her mother is very overprotective, something that she attributes to her mother's unexpected teenage pregnancy that derails her own academic aspirations. Once Reagan begins to show academic aptitude, her mother and other family members transfer their dreams from her mother to Reagan, expecting Reagan to complete the degree her mother was unable to finish. Reagan comments:

My mother told me I was going to college like when I was young. Because my mother was supposed to be the, I don't know, "God-sent child" and she was like really smart, and she got all A's and she was like one of the only people in our family to do that. So they were like, "Oh yeah, she's going to college." But she got pregnant at 17, so she didn't go. So when I came, and they saw how well I was doing in school, my mother like pushed me...there was this pressure I felt, that I was gonna go to college, I was gonna be the one to make it all the way.

More aware of gender based discrepancies in her household because she has a younger brother, Reagan is often frustrated by what she perceives as the double standard in her house around dating behaviors, dress, and overall expectations between her and her sibling. Worried that Reagan would end up getting pregnant if she dresses too provocatively, Reagan's mother conducts clothing checks in which Reagan is expected to change her clothes if the shirt is too revealing or the skirt is too short. Representing the intersection between educational aspirations and defining what it means to be a woman, Reagan feels her mother's impetus for being so strict is because she desperately wants Reagan to be successful. In this case, success is defined as graduating from college. Reagan is perceived as "the golden child," and feels as though "she couldn't mess up, couldn't get pregnant" because everyone is dependent on her being the one who makes it out and breaks the cycle of poverty. Reagan believes her mother's overprotective tendencies and differences in expectations between her and her brother stem from the fact that Reagan is female. She comments:

I definitely saw the differences in being female and my brother being a male.

Because like he got way...like they got so many more privileges that I didn't get because I think my mother was just afraid of me getting pregnant, pretty much like she did."

While her family members communicate messages about her gender and intellectual ability, it is her experiences at her highly elite, private high school that activate her racial identity development, positing race as essential as to how she understands herself. Her pre-college peers play an important role in Reagan's

establishing of race as a primary saliency. She considers her transition to her private high school to be more difficult than her transition to Brooks. One of her coping techniques involves seeking out relationships with the small numbers of African American students who also attend the school. Race is less salient to Reagan during elementary and middle school because of the homogeneity of these environments. Now that she was in a predominately White environment, she finds herself reaching out to student organizations such as the Black Student Union which catalyze her understanding of self as racialized and fortify her desire to relationship build with peers of her same race.

**“Best in your field.”** When Reagan first interviews, she comments both on feeling pressure from her friends to be more religious in addition to pressure from Brooks’ culture to be the “best in your field.” Although both of these entities pressure Reagan to define herself according to their standards and expectations, Reagan’s definition of self is emerging and is distinct from both the university and her peer groups’ ideals. Brooks is an extremely competitive school and there is the expectation that its graduates are going to be among the best in their field, however the most important achievement for Reagan is to positively impact her family. Reagan shares:

If I’m the best of my field, that’s great, but at the end of the day, it’s my family that’s most important...making sure that they’re good citizens. It’s giving back to the community—to me that’s more important than being the best in my field. So I’m not gonna work 1500 hours a week. I’m going to work my 9-5, and then



I'm gonna go home and try to make a difference in somebody's life. And to me, that's just not something that Brooks culture idealizes, I guess.

During the photo-elicitation interview, Reagan shares a photograph she has taken of her outstretched hand, reaching towards an iconic sign bearing Brooks University's name. A photograph taken with intention, Reagan indicates that this image embodies the meaning of life for her and her desire "to change the world for the better." While she recognizes that her Brooks experience serves as an important gateway to her future successes, she elects to define success more broadly than the university does.

**"They don't really identify..."** When asked about her identity development, Reagan immediately references Brooks saying, "I don't think it was until I got here that I really understand like being a woman type thing, and the challenges and struggles of being a woman, especially a black woman." Brenda is exposed to these ideas on both an academic as well as personal level. She comments:

If you look at the media and what's being portrayed, you see either pretty much all the black shows, the females are just about drama. And lots of time, people live by that, like what they see on TV is what they think everybody is like. So we're fighting against that stereotype. We're fighting against not only being black, but a female and we have to fight against that. It's just like people just...I feel like people just look at us like we're not as good, you know?

She believes that her work with the Black Student Association during her tenure at Brooks serves as one step in combating these stereotypes. With an executive board comprised largely of women, Reagan indicates that the efficient management of the

organization and the maintenance of cooperative relationships between the female leaders sets a positive example at least on campus for African American women.

This perception that she is “not as good” also manifests itself in the classroom as Reagan contends with her peers’ perceptions that she does not possess the academic acumen to be successful at Brooks. Reagan, self-admittedly a more reserved person, describes how this plays out in the classroom during group projects:

And again, it may be because I’m quiet in unfamiliar settings, and so maybe it’s like they’re just looking at me like, “Oh, She’s quiet. She must not have done her reading.” or “She’s quiet. She must not know what we’re talking about.” And part of it may be that, but I feel like the underlying cause is they’re looking at me like, “Oh, we got her,” unless I prove myself that I’m worthy of doing more than just the conclusion in a presentation or the intro.

Although her peers see her, they are not actually seeing her as their equal and as a result, make assumptions about Reagan’s ability to contribute to the project in a meaningful way.

Reagan indicates that this also occurs when students make assumptions that all of the African American students on campus are student athletes. She believes that the narrative that student athletes are not on par with the rest of the academic community translates to the general African American student body because of overlaps in the populations and the small numbers of both groups. She expresses frustration, sharing emphatically:

It's annoying to me because I'm like, "I made it...I'm not..." Well, there I go, doing the same thing, because I was about to say, "I'm not an athlete." But not all the athletes here are...I mean a lot of athletes here, they make it through Brooks, and they go on to do great things. So it's like clearly they're smart, but I didn't get here on an athletic scholarship. I'm here on an academic scholarship. So obviously I can do the work.

Seeing Reagan as a part of a monolithic group on campus while not acknowledging the differences within her community contributes to the feeling of being visibly invisible that she also experiences in the classroom.

Reagan does not feel pressure to conform to a Brooks ideal from her non-African American peers. However she does feel this expectation from the African American community. "I think there's pressure to conform in the Black community here. I think there's pressure to be a part of the Black community if you're Black and you identify as Black." Reagan continues providing insight into how her peer group delineates between their peers who "identify" as African American versus those who do not:

And then there are also the people who we call incognegroes because they're clearly black on the outside, but they don't really...while they know they're black, they're not really...they don't really identify....it's hard to explain. It's not necessarily the way they act or who they hang out with, because there are a lot of black people who aren't part of BSA (Black Student Association), but they still are aware that they're black. And I feel like there are some people who they're just not aware that people (non-African Americans) look at them

differently. Like no matter what your friends are or what people say, you are the token in that group.

Although Reagan establishes herself as someone who racially “identifies,” clearly othering those who do not meet her and her peer group’s definition of African American, she also finds herself also on the outside of what it means to be African American at Brooks when she begins questioning her sexuality. Her bisexual status others her within her peer group and while her friends mask their discomfort at her sexuality with religion, the bigger issue is that Reagan no longer meets their definition of what it means to be black.

**“You have to do more than say, ‘I’m a Christian.’** Reagan’s family does not attend church and organized religion is not a part of her life growing up. She does however identify herself as a Christian although it was not until she arrives at Brooks that she realizes “that you have to do more than just say, ‘I’m a Christian,’ to be a Christian.” Reagan speaks about developing a deeper connection to her faith and that is directly attributed to her friend group, many of whom identify as Christian and actively practice their faith by attending Sunday services and going to bible study. When asked how her peers communicate messages about what Reagan’s identity should be, she references:

I just feel like my friends are all really, really Christian. And so they really have this strong sense of yes and no. And to me, I’m just like there’s gray areas, there’s some certain situations where some things are acceptable, and certain situations when those same things aren’t acceptable. But I think my friends try to

push me into being more like then, but very subtly. But it's like, "I haven't seen you in bible study lately," you know? Stuff like that. Subtle things like that, I guess they try to push me to be like a better Christian.

As with most college students, Reagan's relationships with her peers are very important to her. It was not until she arrives at Brooks that she begins exploring her faith, self-actualizing as a woman, and deepening her connection to her racial identity. Her peers facilitate much of that exploration. Recently, Reagan has been exploring her sexuality, particularly her attraction to women. Sharing this information with the researcher was a process as Reagan does not disclose her bisexuality immediately. This information emerges during a discussion of peer influences and their impact on her religious practices and beliefs. Reagan's disclosure comes at the end of the initial interview once she and the researcher begin speaking more informally. It is important to note the context in which this information is shared as it demonstrates how interwoven these elements of her identity, her spirituality and her sexuality, are for her.

Feeling as though being a "Good Christian" and being bisexual are incongruent serves as a significant source of sadness and confusion for Reagan, as evidenced by her emotional response when discussing this topic in her interviews. Some of this can be attributed to the negative response she receives from her peer group when she discloses her attraction to women. Their response and judgment of causes her to second-guess whether she should share this information with anyone else. She says that, "...in my friend group...I feel like I can't be what I wanna be or who I wanna be," and indicates that she feels more self-conscious about her behavior around them. Typically an

affectionate person, Reagan tempers this tendency out of fear that her friends will assume that she is making romantic overtures towards them.

**“Who am I going to show this new me to?”** Recently, Reagan has made the decision to share this information about her sexuality with her friends. She comments that this part of her identity development journey and coming out process has been challenging and at times painful. Out of those friends that she elects to tell about her sexual orientation, some have been supportive while others react badly. Her Christian friends were among those who respond most negatively to Reagan, verbally attacking both her and her partner at the time—also a member of their circle of friends. Reagan views her bisexuality as an important part of her life. She shares a photograph during the photo-elicitation interview which is an image of two sets of feet, one of them belonging to her and the other belonging to the first woman she has been intimate with. When asked her about the process she uses to determine which photographs she is going to take, she indicates that this photograph is one of only two that she knew she was going to take at the very beginning of the photo-journaling process. She shares:

There were two pictures that I thought about and it was the one reaching to Brooks, and it was the one of me and my friend’s feet. And I definitely wanted my friend in there, because I feel like that kind of marks a change in my identity, so it’s a really, really big thing.”

Reagan reveals that her sexuality and her change in self definition from heterosexual to bisexual also coincides with a significant shift in how she sees herself. As discussed earlier, Reagan’s understanding of how her peers make meaning of race

and who is perceived as Black on campus appears to be very fixed, but she is able to acknowledge an emerging fluidity as to how she sees herself and those around her. The evolution that Reagan is experiencing facilitates a greater understanding and appreciation of others' identities. When speaking about this change, she reflects:

Before, I think I was just...I don't wanna say stereotypical, but I felt like I was more like everybody else, more like my friends, more like people I surrounded myself with. Now I feel like I'm definitely more open, and not just open to people of other sexualities, but other cultures and other regions and things like that. I try to be a lot more open and accepting cause that's how I want them to be to me.

Critical to this passage is Reagan's acknowledgment of the sameness she feels with her peer group prior to coming out as bisexual. Prior to coming out, Reagan feels more prototypical, fitting in with her peer group because of their similarities. After she comes out, there is a sense of transformation in which she not only experiences a sexual awakening but an identity awakening as well. With her peer group being largely religious, heterosexual, African American females, an prototype of what is considered to be a typical "African American female" at Brooks University emerges. As Reagan and Rebellion Seeker both experience, there can be challenges within the community and pressure to conform when you deviate from this stereotype. Reagan extrapolates these challenges to society in general, commenting:

If you look at just American culture in general, like the dominant culture is White males. If you deviate from that, in any way, you're just looked at weird. Even as

black females, like we straighten our hair, we get liposuction. I don't know. It's just like we try to fit into that culture. And it's not just black culture—it's everybody trying to fit into that culture because it's the dominant culture. So I think that's the pressure that everybody feels. Even if people don't acknowledge, I think it's underlying in every culture, in every circle, in every part of the region. It's everywhere in America.

Reagan is learning to define who she is on her own terms. While she risks placing herself at odds with her friends, family, the Brooks campus culture, and society at general, it is evident that being true to herself is paramount. She has a clear vision for who she wants to become and illustrates that through a photograph she takes of a fictitious television show character. Reagan shares a photograph of a female, African American character from *The L Word*, a cable television series which chronicles the experiences of LGBT people. The character that Reagan photographs is in the military and Reagan describes her as “tough on the outside but very feminine on the inside.” The character resonates with Reagan's current experiences because like Reagan, she is selective as to whom she shares her sexuality with. Reagan indicates, “...that's definitely something I'm going through now, and will probably continue to go through. She's really cool, so that's kind of like who I want to be...” Reagan acknowledges that in order to get to same place as this character whom she sees as very secure with her sexuality, she will need to have more life experiences. In Reagan's estimation, “Life experience has shaped her [the *L Word* character] and made her realize things about the



world and things about herself. And she's at peace with it pretty much. And yeah, I think I just need to mature and experience more."

### **Their Shared Experiences**

Each of the participants has their own unique body of experiences that influence their identity development and understanding of self. Examining the shared experiences of the three participants is not an attempt to homogenize their voices or to shrink down the nuances of their identity development into common units. It is instead an attempt to highlight those commonalities which emerge as universal for the women, giving voice to the similarities they share in the midst of their three decidedly different journeys. The interconnected nature of intersectionality lends itself to a discussion of the linkages connecting Rebellion Seeker, Brenda, and Reagan.

**Familial influence.** Family plays an integral role in the identity development of each of the participants as they receive many of their early messages, both positive and negative, about their race, gender, spirituality, and academic ability from members of their family. The first identity-oriented messages the participants receive is about their intellectual capabilities. By the time all of the participants reach high school, it is evident to their families that they are extremely intelligent and in the case of Rebellion Seeker and Reagan, both are identified as intellectually "different" at even earlier ages. Rebellion Seeker is posited as the outlier because in addition to skipping grades in elementary school, she "liked books and did her homework" According to her, "I was always the kid that screwed up the curve." Reagan indicates "I was looked at as the smart one," and as a result of this, she takes on this identity because that is how she was

perceived by others. Understanding themselves as smart is one of the first ways of knowing for the participants. The establishing of the participants as being academically high achieving is important as this intellectual ability is what sets the trajectory for each of them to ultimately end up at an institution such as Brooks University.

*Defining womanhood.* None of the participants' fathers are currently present in their lives at the time of their interviews for this study. Rebellion Seeker's father passes away when she was a young child, Brenda's parents divorce when she is in elementary school, and Reagan does not reference her biological father but does make a passing reference to her stepfather during her photo elicitation interview. A lack of male figures in the households establish their mothers and their perspectives and belief systems as primary. It also reinforces the commonly held notion of African American women as strong and independent. Each of their mothers provide them with clear messages about what it means to be a woman. Brenda utilizes the moniker, "The Davis Women," throughout her interview. Her use of this title for her mother and two sisters is more than mere terminology. Inherent in this designation is her mother's definition of what it means to be a woman in the Davis family which includes, "being a hard worker, supporting each other, and not asking for outside help." These early messages serve as the baseline for the participants' initial understanding of what gender means. While both Reagan and Rebellion Seeker understand it as distinct from the other aspects of identity, Brenda seems to understand its inextricable connection to race and class. This happens in part due to the difference in familial structure and the strong presence of female empowerment communicated by her mother.

**Peer influence.** Peer to peer interactions influence each of the participants' perceptions of self whether they intentionally develop an oppositional identity in rejection of their peers' perceptions or whether they allow their peers to shape their understanding of self. While this influence, both positive and negative, becomes less pervasive once the participants are in college and serve as the driving force behind their own identity development, these relationships remain very important in shaping the women's perceptions of themselves. In the case of Reagan, her relationships with her peers and their reaction to her sexuality catalyze her identity development, distancing her from the group yet reaffirming her desire to be true to herself. Although many of her friends did not respond positively to Reagan's bisexuality, she indicates that the process of coming out to them has made her be more selective as to who she shares that part of herself with. Additionally, this experience has changed her and as she frames it, has made her more open, "...not just to people of other sexualities, but other cultures and regions. I try to be a lot more open and accepting because that's how I want them to be with me." Whether their peer group is homogenous or diverse, peers play an important role in affirming the participants' identity.

**College as an activator.** As established by the extant research (Chickering, 1969; Baxter Magolda, 2006; Glisczinski, 2007), college is a time of significant growth and development for students. The college environment catalyzes the participants' personal growth and identity development. Being forced to make their own decisions, students who previously rely on parents or teachers for motivation or to inform their decision-making, now have the latitude to discover who they are outside of these

influences. During her tenure at Brooks, Reagan begins to define herself by her own standards and indicates, “I think I am more confident now...I know what’s important for me, and I look at myself based on like my (emphasis) standards of what’s important and what’s necessary.”

For the participants, college looms as an important new opportunity, one in which they are no longer limited by the expectations or influences of others. When asked about what Rebellion Seeker was feeling on her first day of college, she laughs and retorts, “I’m a newly freed slave!” Each of the participants enters Brooks University with expectations of their undergraduate experience being a liberating one, an environment in which they will be free to express themselves, make their own decisions, and to be in a place where their academic ability is valued. The distance affords them the freedom to make decisions that are congruent with their own belief structures rather than those influenced by their families. Brenda comments, “I think the biggest challenge in college was just understanding that I (emphasis) was in control. I (emphasis) have a certain responsibility to fulfill...”

During this time of tremendous change, the participants are simultaneously discovering new elements of self while redefining or reaffirming other aspects of their identities. Brooks is essential in helping the women take ownership of who they are and what they believe. It is here that Brenda solidifies her identity as an aspiring, African American, female scholar and begins recognizing the opportunities as well as the challenges that presents. Reagan begins identifying as bisexual during this time, coming

out to some peers, and cultivating a definition of self that includes seeing herself through this lens. Rebellion Seeker owns her decision-making. She shares:

I'm not going to get angry or upset because you've decided I'm never going to be anything, or I've made a wrong decision. If I made a wrong decision, I'll fix it later—it's my wrong decision to fix, or it's my wrong decision to live with and learn from."

Their experiences at Brooks, their successes as well as their challenges, foster much of this process for the women.

Although not utilizing this terminology, prior to their arrival at Brooks University, these participants understand their identities as one-dimensional in which only one or two aspects of self are actualized. With the exception of Rebellion Seeker, the other participants only really view themselves as racialized and while they have some awareness of the gendered, sexual, or spiritual aspects of their identities, there is little understanding of the intersecting nature of these aspects. It is also through their experiences at Brooks that they begin to view themselves as multi-faceted, understanding the connectedness between the components of their identity.

**The internal narrative.** Each of the women in this study hold powerful internal narratives that communicate critical messages about their identities. Understanding how each of the participants' make meaning of their own identity is central to this study. One key to doing this is to examine those messages and beliefs the participants internalize which can impact their self-actualization. Because identity is such a personal and self-oriented construction, it is important to highlight those aspects of identity which are self-

originated yet tremendously impact their definition of self. Five points of connection emerge which include *Self as Outlier*, *Self as Authentic*, *Self as Visibly Invisible*, *Self as Change Agent* and *Self as Intersectional*.

*Self as outlier*. Feelings of being an outsider or an outlier are pervasive for each of the participants throughout their tenure at Brooks University. Rebellion Seeker embraces this moniker prior to her arrival at Brooks, sharing in an early interview that this idea has been so engrained in her by her family's positing of her as different from the others that she shares:

This phrase is meaningless now, you've said it so much. It could mean so many things. I'm am (emphasis) outlier. I'm gonna take that as a compliment because I don't really want to be like the rest of you, I really don't (laughs). I don't want to.

While in the case of Rebellion Seeker, this moniker had been one that she ascribes to prior to coming to Brooks, Brenda and Reagan also express feelings of isolation and feeling different from their peers. For Reagan, these feelings of difference stem from her emerging attraction to other women. Although she is being true to herself by exploring these feelings, she feels separated from some members of her peer group, especially those who identify as Christian. Brenda's sense of isolation is mired in her self-doubt, as exemplified by her comment, "I always thought of myself as just Brenda, and I'm just "making it" through Brooks, never thriving." Her initial reluctance to admit her academic challenges hinder her success in the classroom and magnify her feelings of academic inadequacy.

*Self as authentic.* As each of the women evolve throughout their undergraduate experience, there is a sense that they are trying to understand what it means to be their authentic selves. Unwilling to allowing their peers, media, or even their families to define them, the participants are intent on carving out pathways in which they are the own authors of their own authenticity. At times, as exhibited by Rebellion Seeker's experiences with intra-race stereotypes and Reagan's experiences with negotiating both her sexuality and religion, this is difficult because of pressure from their environment to confirm or conform to a stereotype. From their African American peer group, the participants receive a clear definition of what it meant to identify as black. Association with the community is one marker of being "authentically black," but a prototype of blackness also emerges which was broader than mere community involvement and includes being heterosexual, pro-black but not militant, Christian, and intelligent. From Reagan reference to African American students who do not associate with the community as "incognegroes" to Rebellion Seeker's interactions with non African American peers who define black culture "through pop culture...BET, Weezy...and Little John," all of the participants are confronted with messages about their authenticity.

*Self as visibly invisible.* In a campus with only a small percentage of African American students overall, the African American female students are clearly identifiable. The sense of being one of a few African American students in their classes and residential colleges is not a new experience for the participants upon their arrival at Brooks. Most of the participants experience this phenomenon, at least in academic settings, prior to their arrival on campus. While frustrating for the participants, they

grow accustomed to being muted in the classroom or in the case of Brenda, subtly reminded about how competitive this environment is via messages from peers emphasizing, “This is (emphasis) Brooks.” In the case of Brenda, this self-doubt is linked to her academic ability. For Rebellion Seeker, the positioning of African Americans as less intelligent or unable to academically compete causes her to doubt whether Brooks can truly represent the freedom from oppressive, narrow ideas she believes it can when she first arrives on campus. This academic silencing by their peers creates a strong self of self-doubt for the women.

The participants in this study are always visible yet are simultaneously remain unacknowledged. For Rebellion Seeker, she is literally invisible in her residential college community. Confused for another African American woman during her first semester at Brooks, her peers are unable to distinguish between her and another African American woman. When asked about this confusion after it occurs a second time with a different African American student, she laments:

I don’t know if it’s just because you see people a lot, that it just gets meshed in your brain that they’re the same person, or if it’s really a race thing. But I can’t really guess as to why, because I may confuse people, but it’s not because ya’ll are seen together.

For Reagan, feeling invisible is a figurative experience as her peer group is unwilling to acknowledge who Reagan truly is in terms of her sexuality. As Reagan begins exploring her sexuality, her peers’ persistence in encouraging her to attend bible study and connect with her faith escalates. Instead of seeing her for who she is becoming, Reagan’s friends



use religion to encourage and guilt Reagan into connecting with her faith, pushing her to “be like a better Christian.” This attempt to push her towards Christianity and away from bisexuality is their refusal to see Reagan for who she is becoming and instead choosing to define her more narrowly.

*Self as a change agent.* The desire to leave a mark on the world manifests itself throughout the women’s interviews, especially in the photographs they choose to share. Perhaps buoyed by the competitive nature of Brooks or simply endemic to their personalities, each participant sincerely believes that she has the ability to affect change in her environment. Reagan shares a photograph of her hand outstretched towards a iconic sign bearing Brooks University’s name which she says demonstrates her responsibility to leave her mark both on Brooks, the world, and her family. She says:

One of the things I can do is to carry on the family name or whatever and have children and raise them to be well-rounded citizens. And I guess that’s something that everybody does, but I think it’s...I don’t know, especially because family is so important to me, it’s just like a really important thing.

Brenda aspires to make that impact in the classroom through the pursuit of her dreams to become a professor in the STEM disciplines. She comments:

The biggest way I can make an impact is to achieve my goal and become a professor at a university. If I become a tenured faculty member, there is no greater influence I could have on being Black in a science field at a research institution.”

Because of the small numbers of African American, female faculty members in STEM, Brenda indicates that achieving her goal will enable her to positively impact other women of similar backgrounds. Her desire to give back is also exemplified in her mentorship and support of first year, African American STEM majors at her residential college. Each of the women's stories convey the sense that they feel compelled to disrupt the status quo and to make things better than they were before they were present. This potential for greatness is elucidated by Rebellion Seeker's passionate explanation of a photograph in which she reveals that it shows her potential for change, sharing, "I'd like to think that even with all my issues (laughs), there's still something about me that I could (emphasis) create a storm, and not in that totally destructing way, but in a revolutionary kind of way. I can change something (emphasis)."

*Self as intersectional.* Understanding themselves as complex individuals is an important part of the participants' identity development. This study is designed in such a way that participants are never asked outright about their intersecting identities because the researcher deems it important that information, if it is to be revealed, is disclosed organically. In spite of this, all three of the participants demonstrate an understanding of their identities as complex and a knowledge of the confines that society places on people to fit into a narrow definition of what it means to be female, or Black, or heterosexual. Reagan refers to it as "surface homogeneity," this expectation that everyone will try to fit in to the dominant culture. Reagan's identity development centers exclusively on her racial identity until she arrives at Brooks. It is at Brooks that she explores her womanhood as well as her sexuality. Although she views it as acquiring more identities,

thus leaning towards viewing identity as additive—the antithesis to intersectionality—when discussing her development, it is evident that she possesses a deeper understanding of her identity, one which is not the same as her peers. She is aware that her association as an African American, female, Christian, bisexual, First Generation college student, make her similar and yet distinct from those peers who simply identify as only one of those things. Rebellion Seeker is also aware of what it means to be narrowly defined, sharing the following:

I can't expect people to understand what I'm saying when I say, "I'm a girl!"

You don't look like it. "But I am one." You're going to have to accept that.

Expand your basis for what a girl is please, to include me, cause I am a girl. I

might be on the edge of what you think it is, but I am a girl. Or I am Black.

Expand your basis of what you think it is please, because I am Black whether you like it or not (laughs). Deal with it.

Not only do Rebellion Seeker, Brenda, and Reagan have an understanding of their complexities of their identity, but they also are developing an awareness of the pressure and expectations placed on them to conform and to simplify who they are and how they understand themselves to be.

### **Summary of Findings**

In order to understand their identity development, it is essential to first examine the experiences of the participants, both prior to college and while at Brooks University and this chapter presents those findings in a format that places those experiences at the fore. While there are many forces influencing them and their decision-making, once they

arrive at college the participants begin constructing their own realities, determining their preferences and how they want to be perceived by those around them. Because this is an ongoing process, it is not neat or linear and at times only makes sense to the person experiencing the change, but this is reflective of the at time inconsistent, amorphous, intersectional nature of identity. Each participant's journey reflects the complexity of her identity development and how she understands herself at this moment in her life. While commonalities between the women's journeys emerge, what is central to these findings is the individual voices of the participants, each reflecting her unique vantage point on what it means to be her. Chapter V revisits the research questions, tying in the findings with the study's big picture questions and discusses the implications of these findings for researchers and practitioners.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **INTERPRETATION, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this chapter is to bring together the findings generated by the participants and connect them to the research questions and the theoretical framework. The interpretations put forth are generated from these three women's journeys at one very unique, academically selective university. The participants' experiences are important to share because they expand the canon of intersectionality and identity development. The ways in which Rebellion Seeker, Brenda and Reagan make meaning of their identities is not meant to be extrapolated as a universal identity development experience for all African American women at academically selective institutions. However, the process that each of the women experience as their identities are shifting and changing may inform the identity development of other similarly situated groups, providing them with an understanding of the evolutionary nature of intersectionality.

#### **Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

When trying to ascertain who the women in this study are and how they see themselves, it is evident that they understand themselves as complex, dynamic, and ever changing. Although not all of them utilize language that would suggest a full understanding of intersectionality as defined, at its most rudimentary level, the participants recognize that their identity is comprised of a series of intersections. One of intersectionality's greatest challenges is its methodological limitations. How does a researcher get to the heart of how any individual perceives herself while not making assumptions about her identity? More than just the questions the researcher poses, the

researcher must silence her inner voice and her innate desire to draw conclusions from her own observations, and let the participant's identity narrative unfold. Intersectionality represents the evolution of identity development progressing from fixed identity models to ones that acknowledge an individual's growth and development. This same process of moving from fixed to fluid is reflected in the three narratives of the study's participants.

Rebellion Seeker clearly has the broadest understanding of herself as intersectional and additionally, has the academic knowledge and language to articulate this in sophisticated ways. When interacting with her, it is evident that she is not only conscious of her identity development but is actively thinking about it and shaping it. Her relationship with identity and intersectionality is very active and action oriented. As Brenda shares more about her experiences, she reveals information about her identity that indicates she is in the process of examining the relationships between aspects of her identity. She is making the connections between race and gender, between race and class, etc. but is not actively seeking to learn more about these interactions. There is a sense when speaking with her that her identity development is filled with "aha moments" in which she discovers something new about herself after a pivotal conversation with a peer or mentor. She is guiding her own identity development, but it does not appear to permeate her daily thoughts. Reagan is actively in the process of understanding herself as intersectional however it does not unfold in the same ways it does for Rebellion Seeker. Reagan's understanding of herself and her identity is much more nuanced. Not only does she not fully have the language to articulate her understanding of self as intersectional but she is still uncovering **who she is** at the intersections. While the

experience of college served as a catalyst for self-discovery, it is Reagan's emerging sexuality which resulted in a reframing of how she sees both herself and those around her. During the photo-elicitation interview, Reagan is able to provide an example of the type of person she would like to become. Although not able to articulate it with words, the photograph she shares provides an important visual articulation of who she sees herself becoming in the future. This reveals her ability to identify what she values in terms of her identity. Reagan demonstrates a deeper understanding that in order to get to her ideal self, it would take a broadening of her life experiences and being in an environment in which there are fewer barriers to Reagan being authentically Reagan.

Intersectionality represents the antithesis to the stages and phases of traditional identity models. Its lack of structure and inherently amorphous nature is intentional in that it facilitates an individual's discovery of how their identity and its components are intertwined. Positioning identity as fluid is essential to this study and its participants' voices however after learning more about their journeys, it also became important to look at the process by which they began to understand themselves in more complex ways.

### **The Shaping of Identity Development (RQ #1)**

**Family messages.** Prior to their arrival at Brooks University, the participants' identities are shaped largely by their family members and peer groups. As corroborated by Espenshade & Radford (2009), underrepresented students who eventually matriculate at academically selective institutions are more likely to have actively involved parents. The participants' families in particular hold a perception of them and they are assertive

in communicating to the participants what it means to be smart and female. For all three women, messages about race are not explicitly communicated, rather it is assumed by their families that the women had some understanding of themselves as racialized. In addition to providing these messages, their family members also position them as distinct from both their peers and the rest of their family members. Although the participants' parents were not all degreed, each possesses a strong perspective on education and communicate explicit messages to their daughters about their intellect and ability. This messaging around difference feeds into some participants early self-definitions as outliers or atypical from other children. Although not as all encompassing as the messages communicated to Rebellion Seeker around being different, both Reagan and Brenda receive messages about how their intellectual ability and interests will afford them more educational opportunities.

In many ways, the familial messages have a narrowing effect for the participants in this study. By enforcing specific values and connecting those, both positively and negatively, to aspects of their identity, it places an emphasis on those components of self. Instead of allowing saliency to develop organically for each of the participants, family members establish for the women what it means for them to be female in the case of Reagan and Brenda, or what it means to be “different” as in the case of Rebellion Seeker. Rebellion Seeker's pre-college experiences significantly shape her understanding of herself as different from everyone else. As a young child, her family members recognize that she is not like the other children in the family. While her intellectual curiosity and precociousness could have been posited in an affirming way, it



is instead viewed as pejorative or as a phase that she will grow out of once she becomes interested in boys. This becomes the baseline for how she experiences feeling outside of the norm and she takes this sense of feeling different with her to college. Once in college however, Rebellion Seeker begins the process of self-determination and reclaims the outlier title, repurposing it into one which represents her independence.

**Peer messages.** In college, peer relationships supplant family in terms of influence. When those relationships are healthy, they create a space in which the participants are able to explore aspects of their identity. The safety and acceptance of their peer group provides needed support while the participants experiment, engage in personal and identity constructing risk taking, and learn more about themselves. Rebellion Seeker and Brenda's friend groups are healthy and are central in helping them navigate Brooks. Both of these women have relationships which are very transparent and where they are able to be themselves and be accepted for who they were. Counter to that is the experience of Reagan, whose peer group is unsupportive of what they perceived as changes in who they thought her to be. Although it is uncertain as to whether attributable to Reagan's peer group or to the Brooks University environment, the literature does indicate that in academically elite settings, African American students are expected to discard or suppress elements of their identity in order to assimilate into the larger community (Cookson & Persell, 1991). Reagan's peer group places similar expectations on her. In spite of their negative response to her sexuality, it does not stymie her identity development. In many ways, her peer groups' response to her enables

Reagan to see them as they really were, which in turn reinforces her desire to be accepted for her authentic self.

### **The Development and Making Meaning Process (RQ #2)**

Brooks University serves as an important backdrop to the participants' identity development. While all of the women are familiar with being in educational settings in which they are the racial minority, they still experience challenges adjusting to Brooks' unique culture. The residential college system was designed to facilitate the holistic development of college students (O'Hara, 2001) and it certainly plays that role for the women in the study however not in the ways one would expect. As Martin (2009, 2012) and Stevens (2007) research elucidates, there is a strong culture at academically selective colleges that is associated with the upper class lifestyle many of those attending share. What emerges is not only a prototypical Brooks student—one who is socially engaged with their residential college and that considers their residential college identity to be a primary identifier—but a prototypical African American Brooks student.

The prototypical African American student at Brooks possesses core attributes that include being highly intelligent, aware and connected to their racial identity yet not militant or activist oriented, heterosexual, disengaged from their residential college, and spiritual but largely identifying as Christian. This peer-driven expectation to identify, especially along racial lines is consistent with research conducted by Lopez (2005) in which he discusses the experiences of Latino students in a similar academic setting to Brooks who feel intragroup pressure to associate with the Latino population. While the aforementioned attributes do not describe every African American student at Brooks

University, this is suggested as the prototype because these aspects of identity are what is encouraged and self-perpetuated by the African American student community. When Rebellion Seeker expresses interest in being involved with a singing group on campus, it is assumed that she would want to join the campus gospel choir. Rather than ascertaining whether she believes in similar tenets, her peers assume that she would want to participate in the organization, presupposing that she holds their religious beliefs and enjoys similar music. Reagan's peer group responds negatively to her sexuality and attempts to couch their discomfort in the context of spirituality, but based on Reagan's narrative it is clear that her friends' real discomfort lies in how Reagan's sexuality reflects on them.

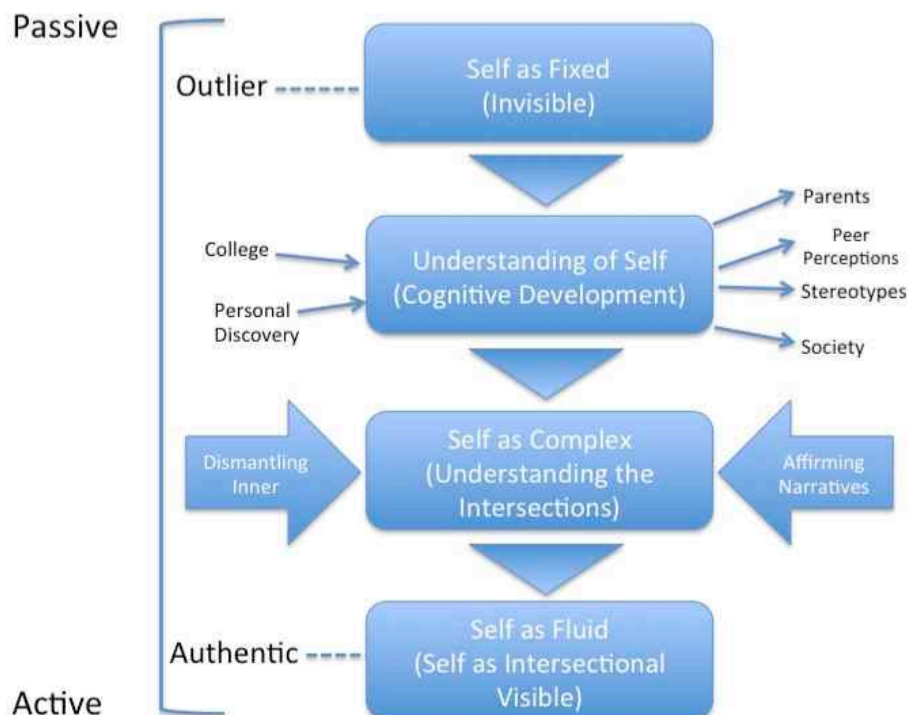
As discussed by Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008), individuals who fall outside of the prototype for a particular group often feel even more marginalized by their intragroup peers for being outside of what is normative for that group. Everyone in her circle of friends who responds negatively to Reagan has distanced themselves from her, seeing her sexuality as being such a deal breaker that they disregard their connection to the other elements of who Reagan is—elements which fostered the friendship initially. In the same ways the participants find some of their non African American peers reducing them down to one denominator in the classroom, and making assumptions about their ability because of their race, Reagan's African American peers perform similarly. They strip away all of her other identity components, instead choosing to focus on the component which they deem antithetical both to how they see themselves and ultimately to who they think African American students are on this campus.

Although Reagan is beginning to see herself as intersectional, her peer group does not allow space for that.

All three of the study's participants defy these narrow definitions, instead electing to define themselves in their own terms. Brenda connects strongly to her residential college. Despite feeling pressure by her African American peers not to do when she first arrived on campus, she takes ownership of this decision and does not allow her peers' perception to limit her. Brenda recognizes the importance of mentorship and support networks as integral to her success at Brooks and the residential college system serves as another community that provides her with guidance and acceptance while facilitating her personal and academic growth. As she references throughout her interviews, she is initially resistant to connect with her residential college, allowing input from older African American students and the experiences of her other first year African American peers to influence her decision-making. As she matures, Brenda realizes that engaging with her college is important to her and something she values and needs. While not a perfect system, Brenda is able to recognize what the residential college experience has to offer her while still feeling as if she can be her authentic self in that setting.

This idea of *Self as Authentic* is one of the internal narratives that the participants all manage during their tenure at Brooks and it emerges as one of the components central to understanding how they make meaning of their identities. What does it mean to be authentic in this environment? When first transitioning to the University, all of the participants effort to be what they perceive as "authentically Brooks," attempting to fit

into either the mold of the typical Brooks student and/or the typical African American student at Brooks. All three discover that these prototypes do not work for them, limiting their ability to be who they see themselves to be. The participants define themselves on their own terms, recognizing that this self-definition might position them as an outlier among their peers, but choosing to make meaning of their identity rather than have that meaning dictated by others. Although the participants each receive strong messages about what their identities should be prior to arriving at Brooks, each is able to carve out her own belief system distinct from these influences.



***Figure 5.1: A Progression of Intersectional Identity Evolution***

### **From Fixed to Fluid: The Process of Viewing Self as Intersectional**

As the participants discuss their exploration of their identities, a process begins to emerge by which the women move from a more fixed concept of identity to one which is more fluid. This progression is explicated in this section and is visually represented in Figure 5.1. When the participants arrive at Brooks University their understanding of self, as they make sense of it, is largely fixed and their engagement with their identity construction and development, largely passive. Rebellion Seeker had accepted the idea that she is an outlier across many facets of her self-identification. Brenda's identity is very grounded in her racialized self and to a lesser extent, in her womanhood although it is uncertain if she would have defined womanhood beyond being "strong" prior to arriving at Brooks. Reagan sees herself as racialized however many of the other aspects of her identity seem unexplored. Once in college, the women begin the active and passive process of uncovering who they are and who they strive to become. College serves as an important context because it marks the first time that the women are able to be independent, free of the influences of their family and their peers who are apt to define the women more narrowly than they see understand themselves to be. This environment also marks the beginning of their acknowledgment and subsequent dismantling of many of the constructs and restrictions placed on them by society.

While at Brooks, the participants encounter messages about their identity from intragroup and intergroup peer relationships, the institutional culture itself, broader society, and their own personal experiences. The biggest shift from their pre-college to in-college experiences is the introduction of intentionality. There is a sense that prior to

college, the women are simply trying to do the right things—those things that were essential to them gaining access to an academically elite university. Working hard, focusing on school, and not getting into trouble are paramount to them achieving their goal. Although not content to let others define them, Reagan, Rebellion Seeker, and Brenda each have a bigger goal in mind and they believe that if they can get to Brooks, they will have the opportunity to grow and develop their identities in this new environment. The reality is that college is not the idyllic environment they hope it to be but learning how to live and interact in this new space catalyzes their development. The cognitive dissonance that arises from some of their college experiences provide moments of clarity in which they are able to determine what they want, what they believe, and how they want to be seen. From this cognitive dissonance emerges an understanding of themselves as complex. These transitions are significant as the participants evolve from viewing self as singular to multi-faceted. Most prevalent for the participants is the transition from seeing themselves as largely only racialized to beginning to understand their identity at its intersections such as race and gender, gender and sexuality, gender, race, and class, or gender, race, sexuality, and spirituality.

Acknowledging the presence of these intersections does not mean that the women do not still compartmentalize aspects of their identity at times, but it becomes more difficult for them to do so. This is a process of recognition not internalization. They begin to recognize the idea that there are not beginnings and endings to the components of their identity. When interacting with peers at Brooks, they are not solely

viewed as African American in one setting, and then identified only by their gender in another setting. They are learning that they are all of those things and more, at all times.

In order to view themselves as intersectional, the participants must dismantle, reclaim, and in some cases affirm their inner narratives. As Azmitia, Syed & Radmacher (2008) establish, it is the college environment which affords students with the opportunity to “rethink their identities and reconfigure them in new ways” (p. 11). The inner narratives represent their self-determined identity, and reflect how they see themselves. While these messages are not free from the influence of others, the shaping and interpretation of them is driven by each of the three women. Through this process, the participants are able to transition from being visibly invisible to “seeing” themselves. While they began the process of self-discovery in a largely passive state, as their understanding of self deepens the women become more proactive and take ownership of the identity development process. The participants begin internalizing their identities as they make meaning of who they are. Once this process happens, you see the participants actively rejecting notions of identity which are additive, exemplified by these thoughts from Rebellion Seeker:

It was all a part of who I am, who I was, and it still is. Having it all together is pretty much not just the way I think, but I guess the way I see myself as like...you know, people are “Well, what are you first?” I’m like this and all of that is what I am—all of that is me—I’m sorry that I can’t separate that out for you, but to separate it out would be to do a disjustice to myself. And I’m sorry I can’t do that—I’ve done that long enough.



Each has experiences at Brooks in which they do not feel seen or acknowledged by the larger community however these experiences are integral in helping the women actualize what it means to be visible.

For Brenda, this process fixed to fluid is about the amplification of her identity development. Her journey is highlighted by an increased understanding of the intersections present in her own life and what being at the intersections could mean for her in the future. Rebellion Seeker's process is about the solidification of her identity development. Possessing a strong self-knowledge upon arriving at Brooks, her journey is about coming to terms with those aspects of her identity that have largely been shaped by other people and the reclamation of those components into something over which she has ownership. Reagan's journey is about transformation. Truly not the same person that she knows herself to be when matriculating at Brooks, Reagan's identity process has been one of definition in which she begins the journey of determining who she is and what she believes.

### **The Impact of Navigation on Integration (RQ #3)**

Viewing themselves as complex and intersectional individuals can make integrating into the Brooks community a challenge. In some aspects, the campus culture can be challenging for underrepresented populations to navigate because of a predisposition for elite universities to be representative of norms from a time when the institution was largely homogenous in terms of ethnicity and gender (Stevens, 2007). In fact, a historical goal of the residential college system was to create this unifying monoculture which may have been effective in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, but in today's

higher education landscape can prove to be counterintuitive to identity development (Duke, 1996). Even in modern, academically elite settings, the very racial and socioeconomic composition of the environment can be one in which African American students feel isolated and unable to truly integrate into the institution. (DeCuir-Gumby, 2007). To counter this, each of the participants find networks of emotional support which proved to be central in their acclimation to the University. For Rebellion Seeker, she is surprised to find a friend at Brooks who is so much like her, feeling at times as if her friend can anticipate what she was going to say before she even says it. Their similar life trajectories and shared experiences of feeling as though they are both infamous outliers at their high school serves as important connection points for Rebellion Seeker. This relationship among others helps her feel less isolated and distinctive from her peers.

Each of the women possesses a tremendous sense of resilience. It is uncertain if that is attributable to their complex identities or simply indicative of many underrepresented students who ultimately end up matriculating at academically selective institutions. It is likely a constellation of factors including elements of both of these. This resilience and determination motivates the women and is an important source of strength and motivation, encouraging them women to persevere even during challenging times. Each understands themselves as change agents, possessing the capacity to positively impact the lives of others upon graduation from Brooks. Brenda hopes to impact others as an African American faculty member in STEM disciplines. She wants to be a role model to women like herself. Reagan plans to change the life of her family through her educational attainment. By being the first in her family to graduate from

college, Reagan is already a change agent. Rebellion Seeker believes she has amazing potential to change and impact those things she was most passionate about. Although still deciding where to funnel that energy, she was convicted about her infinite potential to enact change. Pervasive in each of their interviews, this deep-seated belief in their ability to facilitate large and small scale change is also reflected in their own identity development and their process of discovering who they are. Believing in change for the benefit of others translates into an internal belief within the women, belief that they are capable of growing and progressing.

### **Implications for Practice**

**Diversity opportunity cost.** Academic selective institutions need diversity. It is valuable to the institution because without it, it is difficult for them to be considered a top tier university (Stevens, 2007). While the recruitment and enrollment of diverse students is not the sole motivation for all academically selective universities, in order to remain elite there has to be a certain level of prestige and national acclaim associated with the institution. In addition to the external benefits it can provide for the university, diversity is a necessity because of how it enriches the undergraduate experience. While of benefit to the institution, diversification sans support can be problematic as there is a “cost” associated with this forced diversity for the very students who are responsible for infusing diversity into the campus culture. (Venzant Chambers, Huggins, Locke, & Fowler, 2011). The college environment should foster a sense of learning, encouraging engagement among diverse students while challenging and supporting them as they encounter perspectives differing from their own. It is insufficient to simply recruit and

enroll diverse students if there are inadequate resources designed to address their unique needs. Administrators must look beyond graduate rates when assessing the success of their diverse student communities. Too often, retention gets reduced to success in the classroom, with less emphasis on understanding how overall integration into the campus community impacts a student's ability to be academically successful (Tinto, 1993; Stevens, 2007). Although graduation is the end goal for all institutions and the students who attend those schools, it is insufficient to use this as the primary metric of success, especially if we know that graduation is practically an expectation at academically selective institutions.

**Acknowledging student development.** When assessing the needs of students of diverse backgrounds, it cannot be assumed that they are a monolithic group. Practitioners must make space for students to evolve and grow throughout their undergraduate experience. When African American students matriculate as freshmen, usually one of the first organizations they encounter is a culturally based student organization such as the Black or African American Student Association. These groups have increased importance in settings in which there are very small numbers of African American students they serve as counter-spaces of support and encouragement where students can truly be themselves. The research reflects that these counter-spaces are, “sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (Solorzano, Yasso & Ceja, 2000, p. 70). Given that African American students can feel pressure to shed their identity and conform in these types of elite educational settings (Horvat & Antonio;

Walpole, 2009), having a space in which they can be authentic becomes a necessity. The challenges lies in insuring that these counter-spaces remain open and accessible to all underrepresented students throughout their undergraduate career. Sometimes, students arrive on campus and for a variety of reasons elect to not engage with culturally specific counter-spaces. Some students do not engage because they do not feel as if they need this type of peer support, while others may feel reticent to identify with only one group as their circle of friends is very diverse. Regardless of the reasons that some may not utilize this support avenue, it is important that it remains an option for support throughout a student's time at the institution. While Brooks University does have a Black Student Association, many of the other counter-spaces deemed essential by Solorzano, Yasso, & Ceja (2000) are absent. The small number of options for African American students make accessibility even more important.

Intersectionality and identity development in general is extremely fluid and ephemeral. The person that arrives on campus for freshmen orientation is rarely the same person who walks across the stage at commencement. As Thorne (2004) reminds us, identity development is ephemeral and involves the “dynamic and contextualized understanding of how senses of self are continuous *and* changing” (p. 5). There must be opportunities for students, as their understanding of self evolves, to continue to connect with these counter-spaces as they begin to seeing themselves and their identity as complex. Practitioners working with diverse groups need to continue to engage students all four years of their college education rather than placing the emphasis on the first year. Reagan refers to African American students who are not as racialized as

“Incognegroes.” Practitioners working with cultural groups must not write off these students. Whether ascribing to a stage oriented identity model or those with more flexibility such as intersectionality, all of these frameworks believe that self discovery is a process. Giving them multiple opportunities to connect with the community on their own terms and at their own pace provides support to their ongoing student development.

**Pitfall of narrow definitions.** For African American women, the stress of transitioning into college is exacerbated by entry into a community that is often underprepared to address their unique needs. Administrators, faculty members and practitioners can inadvertently force students into a narrow category defined solely by race or gender because they have not determined how to address the needs of African American women comprehensively. With most universities strapped for resources, women are funneled into programs either concentrated on their race or their gender (Rosales & Person, 2003). Focusing on a single element of identity may temporarily give a voice to individuals in those categories however, “it fails to establish adequate space for individuals who are situated at the margins of multiple groups” (Museus & Griffin, 2011, p. 9). We must afford students with complex identities the opportunity to be heard and supported through the creation of programs on university campuses that acknowledge the diverse needs of African American women.

As the participants’ perspectives support, society places extensive demands on African American women, expecting them to be exemplary in all facets of their lives, something that is especially an expectation for those women who have gained entry into the most prestigious and competitive institutions in the nation. Simultaneous with

experiencing this societal pressure, the participants also felt that the media and society at large stereotypes them. Not only classifying Black women as “strong, dominant and promiscuous” (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood & Hunt, 2012) but in addition, refusing to acknowledge their complexities and intersections. It is during their tenure in college that African American women acquire this orientation towards excellence and community uplift (Rosales & Person, 2003), as evidenced by the narratives shared by Rebellion Seeker, Brenda, and Reagan. Because of their desire “to contribute to change on the behalf of others as well as earn their degrees...African American women need extensive support to succeed in college...that is inclusive of their academic, social, cultural, economic, career, interpersonal, and intrapersonal needs”(2003, p.55). When institutions do not support African American women and their unique needs, assuming that they have the ability and resiliency to persist, it perpetuates the narrative of the “strong black woman,” and takes it a step farther by assuming that she does not need any additional mentorship or guidance which the literature and research indicates is not true (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, Hunt, 2012).

### **Implications for Research**

Expanding the body of research on intersectionality, college student development, and underrepresented groups is imperative if we researchers aim to inform the dialogue on better serving students of varied backgrounds. College student development theory could be transformed if approached from an intersectional background. While Crenshaw’s definition of intersectionality had oppression woven into it as a byproduct of its origins being legal work with African American women,

further research does not have to ascribe to that definition. That would allow for a broadening of the discussion so that college student intersectionality could encompass the gamut of student background including both those possessing many complex identities to those with fewer. Exploring multiraciality and its actualization in the context of college using intersectionality as a framework would be an opportunity to examine this population's identity development holistically. The complexities inherent to multiracial identity could be well served if examined using an intersectional approach. Finally, the methodological application of intersectionality must continued to be explored. Although McCall (2005), Hancock, (2007), and Bowleg (2008) all discuss its methodological challenges, there is little research conducted that examines the implementation of intersectionality and qualitative research. In order to do so, it would require the use of creative methodological methods involving more organic ways of discussing identity with the study's participants. Although employed in research conducted by Stewart (2008), there is still innovation to be had and unconventional methodologies to be explored. The perceived limitations associated with intersectionality cannot limit researchers and the vital body of knowledge which could be generated from this facet of identity discourse. Research involving the effectiveness of alternative methodologies would also make strong contributions to the field of study.

Additional exploration would include the experiences of African American students at academically elite universities, beyond their admission process or their academic retention. While the voices of Latino students at similar institutions have been rudimentarily explored (Ether & Deaux, 1990; Lopez, 2009; Rivas-Drake & Mooney



(2009), the African American perspective remains largely unexamined, leaving a deficit in our understanding of this unique student experience. Operating again at the intersection, the discussion of the educational experiences of high achieving African American should not be limited to discourse focused only on giftedness. While an important part of the dialogue, and one which may overlap with research on African American students at academically selective institutions, it remains important to evaluate and validate the academically elite student experience as well as examine the ways in which the context impacts African American student achievement, integration, development, and retention.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Academically selective institutions convey numerous benefits to the students who gain access into their elite club. The advantages they provide to all members of their community cannot be disputed. For Rebellion Seeker, Brenda, and Reagan, their experience at Brooks University is transformative, providing the necessary background for them to continue exploring their identity development. Although not all in the same developmental place, each of the three participants is able to speak to their identity evolution and the ways in which their challenges and successes, their relationships and their feelings of isolation facilitate their self actualization. The process of moving from a fixed perception of identity to one that is more fluid or intersectional details their identity development journey. While imperfect and at times filled with uncertainty, it parallels the ephemeral nature of intersectionality research.

Rebellion Seeker, in her own voice, suggests what the future of intersectional research could be, sharing “Belief in the social constructs is hard with the millions of compartments, but you believe...it is that belief that is fatal...the belief in the hope that one day the compartments don’t have to conflict.” Although the social constructs and the compartments may always be present in society, the ways in which researchers approach them and how administrators address them from theory to practice does not have to remain the same. Continuing to examine intersectionality through a developmental and context oriented lens will allow for better addressing the limitations of these social constructs and perhaps provide Rebellion Seeker with a future in which the compartments do not have to be in conflict.

## REFERENCES

- Arnett, J.J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens throughout the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469-480.
- Azmitia, M., Syed, M., & Radmacher, K. (2008). On the intersection of personal and social identities: Introduction and evidence from a longitudinal study of emerging adults. In M. Azmitia, M. Syed & K. Radmacher (Eds.), *The intersections of personal and social identities. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 120, 1-16.
- Baxter Magolda, MB (1998). Developing self-authorship in young adult life. *Journal of College Student Development*, 39(2), 143-156.
- Baxter Magolda, M. (2006). Intellectual development in the college years. *Change*, 38(3), 50-54.
- Berry, T.R., Jay, M. & Lynn, M. (2010). Introduction: Thoughts and ideas on the intersectionality of identity. *Educational Foundations*. 24(1), 3-9.
- Bourke, B. (2010). Experiences of Black students in multiple cultural spaces at a predominantly White institution. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 3(2), 126-135. doi: 10.1037/a0019025
- Bowen, W. G. & Bok, D. (1998) *The shape of the river: Long-term consequences of considering race in college and university admissions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Bowleg, L. (2008). When black + lesbian + woman black lesbian woman: The methodological challenges of qualitative and quantitative intersectionality research. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 59, 312-325. doi: 10.1007/s11199-008-9400-z
- Brown, C.L., Love, K.M., Tyler, K.M., Garriot, P.O., Thomas, D. & Roan-Belle, C. (2013). Parental attachment, family communalism, and racial identity among African American college students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 41(2), 108-122. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1912.2013.00031.x
- Chavous, T.M. (2000). The relationships among racial identity, perceived ethnic fit and organizational involvement for African American students at a predominately White university. *The Journal of Black Psychology*, 26(1), 79-100.
- Cole, A.L. & Knowles, J.G. (2008). Arts-informed research. In J.G. Knowles & A.L. Cole (Eds.), *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research* (pp.55-70). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Constantine, M.G., Richardson, T.Q., Benjamin, E.M., & Wilson, J.W. (1998). An overview of Black racial identity theories: Current limitations and considerations. *Applied and Preventive Psychology*, 7, 95-99.
- Cookson, P.W. & Persell, C.H. (1985). Chartering and bartering: Elite education and social reproduction. *Social Problems*, 33(2), 114-129.
- Cookson, P.W. & Persell, C.H. (1991). Race and class in America's elite preparatory boarding schools: African Americans as the "outsiders within". *The Journal of Negro Education*, 60(2), 219-228.

- Cheatham, H. & Berg-Cross. (1992). College student development: African Americans reconsidered. In L.C. Whitaker & R.E. Slimak (Eds.), *College Student Development*, New York: Haworth, 1992.
- Chickering, A. & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *U. Chi. Legal F.*, 139.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.
- Creswell, J. (2006). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cross, W.E. (1971). Discovering the Black referent: The psychology of Black liberation. In V.J. Dixon & B.G. Foster (Eds.), *Beyond Black and White: An alternative America* (pp.96-110). Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
- Cross, W.E., Jr. (1991). *Shades of black*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Cross, W.E. Jr. & Fhagen-Smith, P. (2001). Patterns of African American identity development: A life span perspective. In C.L. Wijeyesinghe & B.W. Jackson (Eds.), *New perspectives on racial identity development: A theoretical and practical anthology* (pp. 8-31). New York: New York University Press.
- Cuyjet, M. (2006). *African American men in college*. Indianapolis, IN: Jossey-Bass.

- D'Augelli, A. & Hersberger, S.(1993). African American undergraduates on a predominately White campus: Academic factors, social networks and campus climate. *Journal of Negro Education*, 62(1), 67-81.
- DeCuir-Gumby, J.T. (2007). Negotiating identity in a bubble: A critical race analysis of African American high school students' experiences in an elite independent school. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 40(1), 26-35.
- Denzin, N. (1970). *The research act in sociology*. London: Butterworths.
- Denzin, N. (1989). *Interpretive biography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln(Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*(3<sup>rd</sup> ed). (pp.1-32). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Downing, N.E. & Roush, K.L. (1985). From passive acceptance to active commitment: A model of feminist identity development for women. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 13(4), 695-709. doi: 10.1177/0011000085134013
- Duke, A. (1996). *Importing Oxbridge: English residential colleges and American universities*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Erikson, E.H. (1959). *Identity and the life cycles*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Espenshade, T.J., Hale, L.E. & Chang, C.Y. (2005). The frog pond revisited: High School academic context, class rank, and elite college admission. *Sociology of Education*, 78, 269-293.

- Espenshade, T.J. & Radford, A.W. (2009). *No longer separate, not yet equal: Race and class in elite college admission and campus life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Essed, P. (1991). *Understanding everyday racism: An interdisciplinary theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ethier, K. & Deaux, K. (1990). Hispanics in ivy: Assessing identity and perceived threat. *Sex Roles*, 22(7), 427-440.
- Evans, N.J., Forney, D.S., Guido-DeBrito, F. (1998). *The development of college students: Theory, research, and application*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Fhagen-Smith, P.E., Vandiver, B.J., Worrell, F.C., & Cross, W.E. (2010). (Re)Examining racial identity attitude differences across gender, community type, and socioeconomic status among African American college students. *Identity*, 10(3), 164-180. doi:10.1080/15283488.2010.495907
- Flowers, L., Osterlind, S., Pascarella, E., & Pierson, C. (2001). How much do students learn in college? Cross-sectional estimates using the College Basic Academic Subjects Examination. *Journal of Higher Education*, 72(5), 565-583.
- Fordham, S. (1993). "Those loud black girls": (Black) women, silence, and gender "passing" in the academy. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 24(1), 3-32.
- Freud, S. (1923). *The ego and the id*. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Fries-Britt, S. (2000). Identity development of high-ability black collegians. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*. 2000(82), 55-65. doi:10.1002/tl.8206

- Fries-Britt, S. & Turner, B. (2001). Facing stereotypes: A case study of Black students on a White campus. *Journal of College Student Development*, 42(2), 420-429.
- Fries-Britt, S. & Turner, B. (2002). Uneven stories: Successful Black collegians at a Black and a White campus. *The Review of Higher Education*, 25(3), 315-330. doi: 10.1353/rhe.2002.0012
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Glisczinski, D.J. (2007). Transformative higher education: A meaningful degree of Understanding. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 5(4), 317-328.
- Gloria, A. M., Kurpius, S. E. R., Hamilton, K. D., & Willson, M. S. (1999). African American students' persistence at a predominantly White university: Influence of social support, university comfort, and self-beliefs. *Journal of College Student Development*. 40(3), 307-316.
- Hancock, A. (2007). Intersectionality as a normative and empirical paradigm. *Politics & Gender*, 3(2), 248-253. doi: 10.1017/S1743923X0700062
- Hardiman, R. (1994). White racial identity development in the United States. In E.P. Salett & D.R. Koslow (Eds.), *Race, ethnicity, and Self: Identity in multicultural Perspective* (pp.117-140). Washington, DC: National MultiCultural Institute.
- Harper, D. (1998). Visual Sociology: Expanding sociological vision. *The American Sociologist*, 19(1), 54-70.
- Harper, D. (2002). Talking about pictures: a case for photo elicitation. *Visual Studies*, 17(1), 13-26. doi: 10.1080/14725860220137345



- Harper, S.R. (2006). Black male students at public flagship university in the United States: Status, trends, and implications for policy and practice. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.
- Harper, S. R., & Griffin, K. A. (2011). Opportunity beyond affirmative action: How low-income and working-class Black male achievers access highly selective, high-cost colleges and universities. *Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy*, 17(1), 43-60.
- Harper, S. R., Wardell, C. C., & McGuire, K. M. (2011). Man of multiple identities: Complex individuality and identity intersectionality among college men. In J. A. Laker & T. Davis (Eds.), *Masculinities in higher education: Theoretical and practical considerations* (pp. 81-96). New York: Routledge.
- Hauser, S.T. & Kasendorf, E. (1983). *Black and White identity formation*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Hays, D. & Singh, A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Helms, J. E. (1984). Toward a theoretical explanation of the effects of race on counseling: A Black and White model. *Counseling Psychologist*, 17(2), 227-52.
- Hill Collins, P. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Horvat, E.M. & Antonio, A. L. (1999). "Hew, those shoes are out of uniform": African American girls in an elite high school and the importance of habitus. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 30(3), 317-342.

Howard-Vital, M.R. (1989). African-American women in higher education: Struggling to gain identity. *Journal of Black Studies*, 20(2), 180-191.

Hurtado, A. (1996). *The color of privilege: Three blasphemies on race and feminism*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Jackson, A.Y. & Mazzei, L.A. (2009). *Voice in qualitative inquiry: Challenging conventional, interpretative, and critical conceptions in qualitative research*. New York: Routledge.

Jackson, B.W. (1976). *The function of a theory of Black identity development in achieving relevance in education for Black students* (Doctoral dissertation) Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Full Text.

Jackson, B. W. (2001). Black identity development: Further analysis and elaboration. In Wijeyesinghe, C.L. & Jackson, B.W. (Eds.), *New perspectives on racial identity development: A theoretical and practical anthology* (pp. 8-31). New York: New York University Press.

Jackson, L.R. (1998). "We're fighting two different battles here": An exploration of African American women's definitions of self at predominately White schools. *Journal of Adult Development*, 5, 171-182.

Jackson, J., & Moore III, J. (2006). African American males in education: Endangered or ignored?. *The Teachers College Record*, 108(2), 201-205.

Jones, C. & Shorter-Gooden, K. (2003). *Shifting: The double lives of Black women in America*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

- Jones, S. (2009). Constructing identities at the intersections: An autoethnographic exploration of multiple dimensions of identity. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(3), 287-304.
- Jones, S. & Abes, E. (2013). *Identity development of college students: Advancing Frameworks for multiple dimensions of identity*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Jones, S.R. & McEwen, M.K. (2000). A conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity. *Journal of College Student Development*, 41(4), 405-414.
- Jordan-Zachery, J. (2007). Am I a Black woman or a woman who is Black? A few thoughts on the meaning of intersectionality. *Politics & Gender*, 3(2), 254-263.  
doi: 10.1017/S1743923X07000074
- Josselson, R. (1995). *Imagining the real. Interpreting experience. The narrative study of lives, vol. 3*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Katchadourian, H. & Boli, J. (1994). *Cream of the crop: The impact of elite education in the decade after college*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Kich, G. (1992). The developmental process of asserting a Biracial, Bicultural identity. In Root, P.P. (Ed.). *Racially mixed people in America* (pp 304-317). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Kingston, P.W., & Lewis, L.S. (1990). Undergraduates at elite institutions: The best, the brightest, and the richest. In Kingston, P.W. & Lewis, L.S.(Eds.), *The high-status track: Studies of elite school and stratification* (pp. 105-120). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

- Lewis, J.A., Mendenhall, R., Harwood, S.A., Hunt, M.B. (2013). Coping with gendered racial microaggressions among Black women college students. *Journal of African American Studies*, 17(1), 51-73. doi:10.1007/s12111-012-9219-0
- Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba E. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 191-214). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lopez, J. D. (2005). Race-related stress and sociocultural orientation among Latino students during their transition into a predominately White, highly selective institution. *Journal of Higher Education*, 4(4), 354-365.  
doi: 10.1177/1538192705279594
- Marcia, J.E. (1980). Identity in adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed.). *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp.159-187). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Marshall, C. & Rossman, G.B. (2011). *Designing qualitative research*. (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Martin, N.D. (2009). Social capital, academic achievement, and postgraduation plans at an elite, private university. *Sociological Perspectives*, 52(2), 185-210.  
doi: 10.1525/sop.2009.52.2.185
- Martin, N.D. (2012). The privilege of ease: Social class and campus life at highly selective, private universities. *Research in Higher Education*, 53(4), 426-452.  
doi: 10.1007/s11162-011-9234-3

- Martin, N.D. & Spenner, K.I. (2009). Capital conversion and accumulation: A social portrait of legacies at an elite university. *Research in Higher Education*, 50(7), 623-648. [doi.org/10.1007/s11162-009-9136-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-009-9136-9)
- Massey, D., Charles, C. Lundy, G. & Fischer, M. (2003). *The source of the river: The social origins of freshmen at America's selective colleges and universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mazzei, L.A. (2009). An impossibly full voice. In A.Y. Jackson & L.A. Mazzei (Eds.) *Voice in qualitative inquiry: Challenging conventional, interpretative, and critical conceptions in qualitative research* (pp.45-62). New York: Routledge.
- McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30(3), 1771-1800.
- McMahan, E. & Rogers, K. (1994). *Interactive oral history interviewing*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Merriam, S.(2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, M. & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mishler, E.G. (1979). Meaning in context: Is there any other kind?. *Harvard Educational Review*, 49(1), 1-19.
- Museus, S. & Griffin, K. (2011). Mapping the margins in higher education: On the promise of intersectionality frameworks in research and discourse. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 151, 5-13. doi: 10.1002/ir.395

- Myers, L.J., Speight, S.L., Highlen, P.S., Cox, C. I., Reynolds, A.L., Adams, E.M., Hanley, C.P. (1991). Identity development and worldview: Toward an optimal conceptualization. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 70(1), 54-63.
- Nash, J.C. (2008). Re-thinking intersectionality. *Feminist Review*, 89, 1-15.
- O'Hara, R.J. (2001). How to build a residential college. *Planning for Higher Education*, 30(2), 52-57.
- Pascarella, E.T., Cruce, T., Umbach, P.D., Wolniak, G.C., Kuh, G., Carini, R.M.,... Zhao, C. (2006). Institutional selectivity and good practices in undergraduate education: How strong is the link? *The Journal of Higher Education*, 77(2), 251-285.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. (2005). *How college affects students*. (Vol. 2) San Francisco: CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Phinney, J. (2008). Bridging identities and disciplines: Advances and challenges in understanding multiple identities. In M. Azmitia, M. Syed, & K. Radmacher (Eds.) *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 120, 97-109.
- Pillow, W. (2003). Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(2), 175-196.

- Poston, C. W. (1990). The biracial identity development model: A needed addition. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 69*(2), 152-155.  
doi: 10.1002/j.1556-6676.1990.tb01477.x
- Purdie-Vaughns, V., & Eibach, R. P. (2008). Intersectional invisibility: The distinctive advantages and disadvantages of multiple subordinate-group identities. *Sex Roles, 59*(5-6), 377-391.
- Reynolds, A.L. & Pope, R.L. (1991). The complexities of diversity: Exploring multiple oppressions. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 70*(1), 174-180.  
doi: 10.1002/j.1556-6676.1991.tb01580.x
- Rosales, A. & Person, D. (2003). Programming needs and student services for African American women. *New Directions for Student Services, 2003*(104), 53-65.
- Rivas-Drake, D. & Mooney, M. (2008). Profiles of Latino adaptation at elite colleges and universities. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 42*, 1-16.  
doi:10.1007/s10464-008-9194-8
- Rivas-Drake, D. & Mooney, M. (2009). Neither colorblind nor oppositional: Perceived minority status and trajectories of academic adjustment among Latinos in elite higher education. *American Psychological Association, 45*(3), 642-651.
- Rudolph, F. (1990). *The American college and university: A history*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.
- Rumberger, R. & Thomas, S. (1993). The economic returns to college major, quality, and performance; A multilevel analysis of recent graduates. *Economics of Education Review, 12*(1), 1-19.

- Ryan, M.B (1992). Residential colleges: A legacy of living and learning together. *Change*, 24(5), 26-35.
- Reynolds, A. & Pope, R. (1991). The complexities of diversity: Exploring multiple oppressions.
- Schulze, S. (2007). The usefulness of reflexive photography for qualitative research: A case study in higher education. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 21(5), 536-553.
- Sellers, R.M., Smith, M.A., Shelton, J.N., Rowley, S.A., Chavous, T.M. (1998). Multidimensional model of racial identity: A reconceptualization of African American racial identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2(1), 18-39.
- Shields, S. (2008). Gender: An intersectionality perspective. *Sex Roles*, 59, 301-311.
- Small, M. & Winship, C. (2006). Black students' graduation from elite colleges: institutional characteristics and between-school differences. *Social Science Research*, 36(3), 1257-1275. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2006.06.006
- Solorzano, D. Ceja, M. & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions and campus racial climate. *Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1), 60-73.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stevens, M.L. (2007). *Creating a class: College admissions and the education of elites*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Stewart, D.L. (2008). Being all of me: Black students negotiating multiple identities. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(2), 183-207.



- Strayhorn, T. L. (2008). The role of supportive relationships in facilitating African American males' success in college. *NASPA Journal*, 45(1), 26-48.
- Strolovitch, D.Z. (2007). *Affirmative advocacy: Race, class, and gender in interest group politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Swim, J.K., Hyers, L.L., Cohen, L.L., Fitzgerald, D.C., Bylsma, W. (2003). African American college students' experiences with everyday racism: Characteristics of and response to these incidents. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 29(1), 38-67.  
doi: 10.1177/0095798402239228
- Thelin, J.R. (2004). *A history of American higher education*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press.
- Thorne, A. (2004). Putting the person into social identity. *Human Development*, 47(6), 361-365. doi:10.1159/000081038
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Toma, J.D. (2000). How getting close to your subjects makes qualitative data better. *Theory into Practice*, 39(3), 177-184.
- Torres, K.(2009). Culture shock: Black students account for their distinctiveness at an elite college, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 32(5), 883-905.  
doi: 10.1080/01419870701710914
- Torres, V., Jones, S.R., & Renn, K.A. (2009) Identity development theories in student affairs: Origins, current status, and new approaches. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(6), 577-596.

- U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education (NCES). (2012). *Digest of education statistics*. Retrieved May 6, 2013, from <http://nces.ed.gov/>
- U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education (NCES). (2009). *Achievement gaps: How black and White students in public schools perform in mathematics and reading on the national assessment of educational progress*. Retrieved June 1, 2012.
- Venzant Chambers, T. T., Huggins, K. S., Locke, L. A., & Fowler, R. M. (2011). The role of “racial opportunity cost” in the educational experiences of academically successful students of color. Manuscript under review.
- Venzant Chambers, T.T. & McCready, L. T. (2011). “Making space” for ourselves: African American students responses to their marginalization. *Urban Education*, 46(6). 1352-1378. doi: 10.1177/0042085911400322
- Walpole, M.(2009). African American women at highly selective colleges: How African American communities shape experiences. In V.B. Bush, C.R. Chambers & M. Walpole (Eds.), *From diplomas to doctorates: The success of Black women in higher education and its implications for equal educational opportunities for all* (pp. 85-107). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Winkle-Wagner, R. (2008). Not feminist but strong: Black women’s reflections of race and gender in college. *Negro Educational Review*, 59(3-4), 181-195.
- Winkle-Wagner, R. (2009). *The unchosen me: Race gender, and identity among Black women in college*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Winkle-Wagner, R. (2009). The perpetual homelessness of college experiences: Tensions between home and campus for African American women. *The Review of Higher Education*, 33(1), 1-36.
- Yin, R. (1989). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Yin, R. (2003). *Applications of case study research*(2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Yin, R. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods*(4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## APPENDIX A

### PHOTO-JOURNALING INSTRUCTIONS

Words are not always sufficient to communicate who we are and what we value. Although you have had the opportunity to share your experiences during the interview process, here is another opportunity to share your story and experiences using photographs taken by you.

Using a digital camera, create a digital photo album that would communicate to a stranger who you are. There are no requirements as to what the subject of these photographs can or should be as long as they are reflective of you, your values, and your experiences.

The only additional parameter of these photos is that they cannot contain identifiable images of other people.

Use the following questions to jumpstart your photo-journaling if you are having difficulty knowing where to begin:

- **What do I value?**
  - **Is what I value about myself, valued by my friends, peers, society? If not, what do they value?**
- **How do I see myself?**
- **How do others see me?**
  - **Is how I'm defined by others, consistent with how I would define myself?**
    - **Or another way of thinking about this—Who is the public me versus the private/personal me?**
- **Who am I at school? Am I the same person that I am at home?**
  - **If not, how am I different?**
  -

Take as many or as few photographs as you need to communicate these ideas. After you take your photos, we will have a follow-up interview during which I will ask you to show me 10 photos of your choosing. If you do not have access to a digital camera, please contact Shelah Crear at [s\\_crear2005@neo.tamu.edu](mailto:s_crear2005@neo.tamu.edu).

Once you have completed photo-journaling, please contact Shelah for additional information regarding next steps for sharing the photographs.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **E-MAIL TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS**

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is Shelah Crear and I am a Higher Education Administration doctoral student at Texas A&M University. I am conducting a research study that seeks to learn more about the experiences of African American women attending a private, academically selective institution. The intent of this study is to learn more about how you define yourself in terms of the various aspects of your identity, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. I also hope to learn more about how these aspects of your identity have been shaped through both your undergraduate and life experiences and the impact navigating these identities has had on your academic and social integration into the campus community.

As the principal investigator of this study, I am looking for female students who meet the following criteria:

- 1) \*African American
- 2) United States Citizen
- 3) Between the ages of 19 and 24
- 4) Must have matriculated into the university as a freshman between Fall 2008 and Fall 2010

\*Students of African and Caribbean descent as well as bi/multiracial students are eligible to participate in this study provided that they self-identify as African American.

Should you meet these criteria and have interest in participating in this study, you would be asked to participate in face-to-face interview(s), photo-journaling (1 time) and electronic journaling(minimum of 3 entries). I would also ask that you complete a brief biographical questionnaire so that I can learn more about your life experiences prior to coming to college.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may elect to withdraw from the study and terminate your participation at any time with no penalty to you.

If you are interested in participating in this study or would like additional information about the study, please e-mail me with your name and contact information at [s\\_crear2005@neo.tamu.edu](mailto:s_crear2005@neo.tamu.edu).

Thank You,

Shelah Crear  
Higher Education Administration Doctoral Candidate  
Texas A&M University

## APPENDIX C

### TELEPHONE SCRIPT FOR SAMPLE RECRUITING FOLLOW-UP

**SFC:** Hello (insert name),

My name is Shelah Crear and I am a Higher Education Administration doctoral student at Texas A&M University. You were suggested to me as someone who might be interested in participating in my research study. My study focuses on identity and I am trying to learn more about how African American women on campus define themselves. Aspects of identity that could be discussed include race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, among others. I also hope to learn more about how these aspects of your identity have been shaped through both your undergraduate and life experiences and the impact navigating these identities has had on your academic and social integration into the campus community.

Does this study sound like something you might be interested in?

**POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT:** If yes, proceed to next question.

If no, respond as follows: *Thank you so much for taking time to speak with me today. Have a great rest of the semester.*

**SFC:** I am looking for female students who meet a specific set of criteria for my study. Do you self-identify as African American? Are you a United States citizen? Are you between the ages of 19 and 24? Did you arrive on campus as a freshman between Fall 2008 and Fall 2010?

**\*\*If a student seems hesitant when answering questions about self-identifying as African American, volunteer information indicating that students of African or Caribbean descent as well as bi/multiracial students are eligible to participate.**

**\*\*Potential participant must respond affirmatively to all questions in order to proceed.** If any of the potential participant's responses are 'No,' the response is as follows: *Thank you so much (insert name) for your time, but I am looking for participants who fit very specific criteria. I appreciate your interest in my study and your willingness to speak with me today. Before we get off the phone, I have one more question—Now that you know more about my criteria for my study, do you know of anyone that fits that criteria and that you think might be interested in being a part of my study? Thank You.*

**SFC:** Participating in this study means that we would have at least one face-to-face interview. I would also ask you to electronic journal or blog as well as photo-journal. Electronic journaling would entail you writing down your thoughts and feelings about your daily experiences. Although you can journal more if you would like, for this study

I would like you to journal at least three times. Photo-journaling would involve you taking photos that illustrate who you are. These photographs cannot have any identifiable people in them, but other than that, they are your opportunity to share more about yourself using photographs. Photo-journaling would only occur one time and you can take as many or as few pictures as you would like. I will also ask that you complete a brief biographical questionnaire so that I can learn more about your life experiences prior to your coming to college.

After hearing that information, do you have any questions about what you would be doing if you decide to participate in the study?

**POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT:** If yes, provide clarifying information.  
If no, move to next question.

**SFC:** I am going to collect a lot of information from you and the other participants in the study, but this information will remain confidential. You will not be identified in the study by your name, but instead will only be referred to using a pseudonym you select. More specific information will be outlined in a consent form that provides even more detail about the study and what it means for you to be involved with it. You will receive a copy of this information, so if at any time you forget what you have agreed to, decide that you don't want to participate anymore, or have any questions at all, you will know how to get in touch with me.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may elect to withdraw from the study and terminate your participation at any time with no penalty to you. Are you interested in being a part of this study?

**POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT:** Yes.

**SFC:** Thank You. Let's set up a time for us to speak on the phone further about the next steps in this process. (i.e. signing consent form, etc, scheduling an initial interview, etc.)

If participant indicates that she is not interested respond by saying: *Thank you so much (insert name) for your time. I understand if participating in this study doesn't work with your schedule or if you just are not interested in being involved. I appreciate your interest in my study and your willingness to speak with me today. Before we get off the phone, I have one more question—Now that you know more about my criteria for my study, do you know of anyone that fits that criteria and that you think might be interested in being a part of my study?*

## APPENDIX D

### SAMPLE INTERVIEW GUIDE

*Understanding the Construction of Identity for African American, Female, College Students at an Academically Selective Institution*

**Structure and Use of the Guidelines:** These guidelines will be utilized as a framework for the initial interview with the participants. Given the fluidity of identity in general and intersectionality specifically, the direction of the interview and the scope and depth of topics covered will be largely dictated by the participant.

The guidelines are divided into four broad categories for discussion:

- I. Introduction and Background
- II. Pre-College Experiences
- III. Undergraduate Experiences
- IV. Identity Formation and Construction

#### **I. Introduction and Background**

Background information about researcher and purpose of the study

Review of participant's biographical/familial questionnaire

Participant's general understanding of identity

#### **II. Pre-College Experiences**

Family structure, culture and influence

Socioeconomic status

Any fluctuation in status or was it consistent throughout childhood?

Parental ethnic background and education

Parental occupation and impact on household decisions

Parental expectations surrounding education, financial, spiritual, and how they were communicated

Development of participant's value system

How did these messages get created? What were the messages?

Who presented these messages?

K-12 education—public, private, parochial, specialized program?

Who/what determined the educational trajectory for the participant?

Positive or negative school/academic experiences

Messages received about the participant's intellect on its own and in comparison to her peer group

First Friends—homogeneous or diverse?

How were these developed?



Memories of identity from childhood—what is salient?  
Significant events: positive/negative experiences  
Pivotal experiences influencing childhood and young adult perception of self  
Introduction to elite education pipeline

### **III: Undergraduate Experiences**

Family response and reaction to leaving for college  
Perceptions of University environment/culture  
First impressions of the campus  
Overall perception of campus  
Overall perception of campus climate, social and academic  
Residential college environment/culture  
First friends in college  
How did these relationships develop?  
How do friendships develop in college?  
Roommate experience: positive and negative  
Perceived perception of her by her peers  
Academic experiences and reaction by peers, faculty, staff and administrators to her  
Social experiences: positive and negative  
Do you feel socially integrated? Barriers or assists to this integration?  
Freshman Year Experiences  
Social transition to college life  
Academic transition to college life  
Is there external and/or internal pressure to conform?  
Conforming to what? What identity?  
How is the campus community defined?  
Are you a part of that community? What does that mean to “be a part?”  
Pivotal experiences influencing/constructing current perception of self  
Family response to changes in identity

### **III. Identity Formation and Construction**

Academic choices and their impact on saliency  
Cultural/society expectations of her identity and who she should be  
Challenges and barriers to identity formation  
What does it mean to define identity?  
Is there a desire to define identity?  
Connection between identity formation and value system construction  
Identity transparency—can you be who you want to be?  
Does society allow for it?  
Dissonance between self-definition and external forced definition

## **APPENDIX E**

### **PHOTO ELICITATION INTERVIEW GUIDE**

Give the participants the photos and have them determine which photos were shown and in what order.

#### **Pictures:**

- Describe the photo to me, providing as many specifics as possible.
- What does this photo mean to you in the context of identity?
- How did you decide to choose this image to photograph?
- How does this photo make you feel?

#### **Process:**

- Do the photos go in any order?
- Did you take more than these pictures? If so, why did you select these?
- What was your process for determining what to take pictures of?
- Did you use the prompts at all?
  - If so, which ones?

#### **Collage:**

- Looking at this collage of photos—what do you think?

#### **Closing:**

- What was this process like?
- What things did you consider/think about when doing it?
- Anything else I should know about you or about this process?

## APPENDIX F

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**Texas A&M University  
College of Educational Administration and Human Resource Development  
Institutional Review Board  
Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

**Project Title:** Understanding the Construction of Identity for African American, Female, College Students at an Academically Selective Institution

You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by a Texas A&M University researcher. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to participate. It will outline the study's purpose, procedures to be followed during the study, its potential risks and benefits, your rights as a participant, and the measures that will be taken to insure your confidentiality. If you decide to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent.

**Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this study is to learn more about how you, as an African American woman attending a private, academically selective institution of higher education, define yourself in terms of the various aspects of your identity, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. I also hope to learn more about how these aspects of your identity have been shaped by both your undergraduate and life experiences and the impact navigating these identities has had on your academic and social integration into the campus community.

**How Many People will be Asked to be in this Study?:**

3-6 participants will be invited to participate in this study locally.

**What will I be asked to do?**

You will be asked to participate in no more than two face-to-face interviews, not to exceed two hours per interview, photo-journaling (1 time) and electronic journaling (minimum of 3 entries). If necessary, follow-up information may be gathered via e-mail, phone call, or via additional interviews. Prior to your initial interview, I would also ask that you complete a brief biographical questionnaire so that I can learn more about your life experiences prior to coming to college. Your participation in this study will not exceed 6 weeks.

**Will photo, video or audio recordings be made of me during the study?**

An audio recording and transcription will be made of each interview. Records will be destroyed five years after the initial recording.

**What are the risks involved in this study?**

The risks associated with this study are minimal, however for some participants, engaging in discussion about various identities (race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, etc.) may create feelings of discomfort or anxiety. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to. Should you experience discomfort as a result of participating in this study and want additional assistance, you will be connected with the appropriate resources for support.

<b>Texas A&amp;M University IRB Approval</b>	From: 05/15/2012	To: 05/14/2013
IRB Protocol #2012-0227	Authorized by: SD	

**What are the possible benefits of participating in this study?**

As a participant in this study, you will have the opportunity to learn more about your identity development and to contribute to a study that could positively impact the experiences of African American undergraduate women.

**Do I have to participate in this study?**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without your current or future relationships with Texas A&M University and/or Rice University being affected.

**Who will know about my participation in this research study?**

This study is confidential and the records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Shelah Crear will have access to these records.

**Who do I contact with questions about the research?**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Shelah Crear, (972)746-9425, [s\\_crear2005@neo.tamu.edu](mailto:s_crear2005@neo.tamu.edu), Dr. Terah Venzant Chambers, (979)862-7972, [tvenzant@tamu.edu](mailto:tvenzant@tamu.edu) or Dr. Fred Bonner, [fbonner@tamu.edu](mailto:fbonner@tamu.edu).

**Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?**

The Human Subjects Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University have reviewed this research study. It has also been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Rice University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact Texas A&M at (979)458-4067 or [irb@tamu.edu](mailto:irb@tamu.edu).

**What if I Change my Mind About Participating?**

This research is voluntary and you have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide to not begin or to stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study or stop being in this study, there will be no effect on your student status, medical care, employment, evaluation, relationship with Texas A&M University or Rice University.

**Statement of Consent:**

Please be sure that you have read and understand all of the above information and have asked and received sufficient answers to any questions or concerns you have. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records. **Your signature indicates that you agree to participate in this study and are giving permission for the investigator to use your information for research purposes.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Participant's Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Printed Name**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

<b>Texas A&amp;M University IRB Approval</b> IRB Protocol #2012-0227	From: 05/15/2012 Authorized by: SD	To: 05/14/2013
---	---------------------------------------	----------------

## APPENDIX G

### PHOTOGRAPH DESCRIPTIONS

Participant Name	Description of the Photograph (provided by the participant)	Order Discussed in Interview	Category of Photograph	On/Off Brooks Campus
Rebellion Seeker	View out of the bus window. Includes an ambulance and a few cars. Focus is on the sky and the reflection of the sun. Taken because of the sky space	1 <i>*Did not sequence photographs.</i>	Scenery/ Nature	OFF
Rebellion Seeker	Picture of the bayou by RS' house. Taken in the early morning. Taken because of the light and reflection off the water	2	Scenery/ Nature	OFF
Rebellion Seeker	Wire container (originally a pencil holder) containing paintbrushes, a hair pick, a hammer, a silk flower, a pair of sunglasses, a dry erase marker, a chopstick, a Sharpie, measuring tape, and a toothbrush. Container is located in participant's bathroom. Taken because it demonstrates how RS brain organizes things	3	Inanimate Objects	OFF
Rebellion Seeker	Photograph of the sky taken at sunset. Half the photograph is dark and the sun is shining through the clouds. Picture is taken as RS arrives home. Taken for the sky space and specifically for the balance between light and dark, differing it from Photo #1	4	Scenery/ Nature	OFF
Rebellion Seeker	Bookshelf in RS' closet. Contains an assortment of books including an Asian cookbook, books on dragons, comics, Physics and Science, one on remodeling cars, lifeguarding, leaning Kongee, differential equations, Chemistry, mythology, and poetic forms. Taken because it represents RS's eclecticism	5	Inanimate Objects	OFF

Rebellion Seeker	A burgundy Toyota, circa 98-99. Taken because it represents a time in RS's life when her relationship with her mother was better	6	Inanimate Objects	OFF
Rebellion Seeker	Houses in a neighborhood taken in the early morning. The street curves off into the distance. Taken for the curving road. Shot was taken three times to get the desired image	7	Scenery/ Nature	OFF
Rebellion Seeker	Photograph of the bayou taken in the early morning. Aura of light coming over the nearby apartment is in the photograph. The image contains the sun, water, and road imagery of previous photographs. Taken because of its representation of her friend with whom she shares many similarities (most unknown infamous person—see pg. 145)	8	Scenery/ Nature	OFF
Rebellion Seeker	Similar to Shot #8 however it is taken on a day when a storm was eminent. Taken for RS's ability to effect change and "create a storm"	9	Scenery/ Nature	OFF
Rebellion Seeker	Large office building adjacent to Brooks University campus. Tree is partially blocking the image of the building representing the connection between nature and something man-made. Taken for its correlation to RS's definition of identity	10	Scenery/ Architecture	OFF
Brenda	View outside her bedroom window. Includes both sky elements as well as a large field. Some campus buildings are also in the background. Taken because it reminds B that there's a world outside of Brooks.	1 <i>*Did sequence photographs.</i>	Scenery/ Nature & Architecture	ON
Brenda	Large dry erase board in B's bedroom. Called her "Gameplan" it outlines what needs to be done in 2 week increments. Includes a	2	Inanimate Object	ON

	section for a scripture. Taken because it keeps her “grounded.”			
Brenda	View from her desk. Photograph includes her laptop (Google browser is pulled up) and planner because she uses e-mail, her computer, and her planner to stay organized. Taken because it demonstrates the importance of order in her life.	3	Inanimate Objects	ON
Brenda	Another photograph of her desk, including a blank sheet of paper she always keeps next to her for brainstorming or remembering things that need to get done. Desk includes another planner. Represents self-discipline.	4	Inanimate Objects	ON
Brenda	Taken out the window of her room, but facing another section of her residential college. Taken because it captures community and the importance she places her residential college.	5	Scenery/ Architecture	ON
Brenda	Path that leads to class from her residential college. Has meaning to her because it is not a path that is traveled by a lot of people each day. Taken because she sees it representing her life	6	Scenery/ Nature	ON
Brenda	Laboratory where B conducts research. Taken because B believes the lab have given her intellectual merit both personally and with her peers	7	Architecture/ Inanimate Objects	ON
Brenda	Taken from the second floor of her residential colleges dining facility. Taken because she feels it represents a place where she can be herself.	8	Architecture	ON
Brenda	Picture of her bedroom wall containing pictures of friends, family members, and personal mementos. There is also a large chair in the corner. Someone is sitting in it but his/her face is concealed. Taken because the	9	Inanimate Objects	ON

	chair represents the peace that B gains through relationships			
Reagan	Picture of clouds with the sun's rays peeking through the clouds. Taken because it represented how R thought she was very opaque with her friends, but they perceived her as being transparent	1 <i>*Did sequence photographs.</i>	Scenery/ Nature	OFF
Reagan	Photograph of R firing a gun at the gun range. Picture is taken as she fires the gun so the flames coming from the weapon are evident. Taken because it represents her aggression	2	People	OFF
Reagan	Abstract painting of an African American girl dancing. Taken because it represents R's passion. R indicates that she took the shot impulsively because it connected with how passionate she is about things she loves	3	Artistic Representation	OFF
Reagan	Picture of a male baby. His face is partially disguised. R indicates that she does not know him personally. Taken because it represents her future aspirations to be a midwife as well as the importance of family/having a family is to her	4	People	OFF
Reagan	Large picture of Brooks' mascot. Taken during a special event at the University. R indicates that it represents an intensity and drive that connects with her.	5	Brooks Iconography	ON
Reagan	Outstretched hand reaching towards an iconic Brooks University sign. Taken because it reflects her aspirations to leave her mark on the world.	6	Brooks Iconography	ON
Reagan	Two sets of feet captured from the knees down. Represent R's feet and the first female that she was intimate with. Captured because it represents the importance of her exploration of	7	People	Uncertain



	her sexuality to her and her identity development			
Reagan	Character from <i>The L Word</i> who is one of the show's first African American characters. Taken because as an African American, lesbian in the military she knows who she is and represents how R wants to be perceived as her identity evolves.	8	People	Uncertain